

Who Has Sanctified Us Through His Commandments

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Introduction

Sanctity—holiness²—is the principal, overarching aim of the Torah way of life, both for individuals and for the Jewish people as a whole.³ It is the ultimate purpose of a life lived in accordance with the covenant between God and the people of Israel, of a life of fulfillment of God's law as expressed in God's commandments.⁴

This essay has three major sections. First we will look at some of the evidence supporting our opening paragraph. We will bring evidence from the Torah—both in general, comprehensive statements, and in verses concerning specific, concrete areas of life. We will also bring evidence from formulations of prayers and blessings by our sages of ancient times. Second, we will discuss what sanctity means as the ultimate purpose of Jewish life, and how *mitzvot* can help⁵ to achieve it.⁶ Finally, we will present an educational tool that illustrates and clarifies this overall perspective of Jewish life and how its system of divine commandments can lead to a life of holiness. This tool has been used in teaching both children and adults. It has proven of value both for Jews born into religious families and for newcomers to the Torah way of life, both converts and people who were born Jewish.

Part I: Evidence That the Aim of the *Mitzvot* Is Holiness

The evidence that sanctity is the goal of the commandments and the primary aim of Jewish life is rooted in the Torah, as well as in the teachings of the talmudic sages.

A. Evidence in the Torah

As God was preparing the Israelites to receive the Torah, God told Moses to tell them, “And you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation [dedicated] to Me! These are the things you shall tell the Israelites” (Exodus 19:6). God’s kingdom of priests and “holy nation”: this is what the Israelites are charged to become through Torah, *mitzvot*, and the covenant of Sinai. We will now present seven specific commandments (or groups of commandments) whose aim is stated explicitly in the Torah to be sanctification. At first, this may appear to be belaboring the point. However, in Part II it will become clear why it is so significant that each of these areas be specified, and in Part III it will become clear how this elaboration underlies the educational tool we will present. The last selection we will present in this section will address both all of the *mitzvot* as a whole, and two important specific areas of life.

1. *Sanctity in Time* The fourth of the Ten Commandments that were pronounced at Sinai, after the comprehensive introduction we saw above, called upon the Israelites to acknowledge one day of the week as sacred: “Be continuously aware of (*zakhbor*, literally, “remember”) the Sabbath day, to make it holy (*l’kad’sho*)!” (Exodus 20:7). This calls for making the Sabbath day holy by molding the experience of the sacred day proactively to be pleasant, thought-inspiring, consciousness-raising, and memorable throughout the week. According to rabbinic tradition, this message was stated simultaneously with the command to make the Sabbath day holy by “guarding” it, refraining from any of the activities included in the term *m’lakhab*:⁷ “Guard (*shamor*) the Sabbath day continuously, to make it holy (*l’kad’sho*), as the Eternal your God has commanded you” (Deuteronomy 5:11).⁸

Indeed, the source of the sanctity of the Sabbath day is described in the Torah as being an act of God, as is recorded at the conclusion of the major events of the six days of creation: “And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it (*va-y’kaddesh oto*), for on it God ceased all the *m’lakhab* that God had created [for human beings] to complete” (Genesis 2:3). Thus, too, we read: “Six days *m’lakhab* may be done, but on the seventh day [there shall be] a Sabbath of cessation, sacred to God” (Exodus 31:15). This theme is repeated in the Torah several times.

This was not the Israelites’ first encounter with the notion of sacred time. As Moses prepared them for the exodus, God commanded them to recall this unique historical event throughout the generations with a seven-day celebration, a mixture of prescribed actions and prohibitions,⁹ creating a holy time: “And you shall have on the first day a [day of] sacred assembly, and on the seventh day a [day of] sacred assembly; no *m’lakhab* shall be done on them, except that which every person eats, that only may be prepared by you” (Exodus 12:16). Ultimately, all of the biblical festivals were characterized as holy times, introduced as follows: “Speak to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The appointed times of the Eternal, which you shall proclaim as [days of] sacred assembly (*mikra’ei kodesh*)—these are My appointed times” (Leviticus 23:2).

2. *Sanctity in Space* At the heart of the Israelite camp in the desert, they were to create a sacred space: “And they shall make a sanctuary (*mikdash*) [dedicated] to Me, and I shall dwell in their midst” (Exodus 25:8). Indeed, as the Israelites sang praises to God shortly after being freed from slavery in Egypt and being brought miraculously across the Reed Sea, it was already their vision for the future to settle in the land of Israel and construct a sacred place dedicated to God from which they could bring the message of God as Ruler of the universe to all peoples: “May You bring them in and may You plant them on Your mountain inheritance; O Eternal, You have created a firmly-founded place for You to reside; Your hands, O God, have firmly established a sanctuary (*mikdash*)... The Eternal

will reign forever and ever” (Exodus 15:17–18).¹⁰ Yet these were not the Israelite’s first encounters with the notion of sacred space. Earlier in the book of Exodus, we read: “And [God] said [to Moses]: ‘Do not come near to here, remove your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is sacred ground (*admat kodesh*)’” (Exodus 3:5).¹¹

3. *Sanctity in Eating* The sanctity of Israel was to be expressed not only in time and place, but also through the very act of eating. Thus, we read: “And you shall be holy people (*anshei kodesh*) for Me, and [so] you shall not eat flesh torn in the field; throw it to the dogs” (Exodus 22:30). The fruit of the tree, during the fourth year after planting, was to be sacred: “And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be sacred to the Eternal, for praising [God]” (Leviticus 19:24). The Torah repeatedly calls upon the Israelites to restrict what they eat, so that they will be holy: “For I am the Eternal your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, for I am holy, and do not make your souls impure by [eating] any of the creatures that creep on the ground” (Leviticus 11:44).

4. *Sanctity of People* The Torah also teaches about sanctifying certain human beings. This includes the priests (*kohanim*), of whom the Torah states: “And you shall sanctify him (*v’kiddashto*), for he offers up your God’s [i.e., the altar’s] food; he shall be holy to you, for I, the Eternal, who makes you holy, am holy” (Leviticus 21:8). Similarly, a woman’s firstborn male child is sacred and is to be declared sacred, as it is written: “Sanctify (*kaddeish*) every firstborn to Me—every one that opens the birth canal among the Israelites—among the people and among the animals is [dedicated] to Me” (Exodus 13:2). This sanctity was partially transferred to the Levites, as the Torah states: “For every firstborn among the Israelites—among the people and among the animals—is [dedicated] to Me, for on the day that I struck all of the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Me” (Numbers 8:17). And the Torah states that God sanctified the tribe of Levi in place of the firstborn: “For they [the Levites] are surely given to Me from among the Israelites; I took them as Mine

in place of all of the firstborn among the Israelites who opened the birth canal” (Numbers 8:16).

5. *Sanctity in Social Justice and Ethical Relations* A long list of familial, social justice, ethical, and ritual commandments begins with the following heading: “Speak to the entire congregation of the Israelites and tell them: ‘You shall be holy, for I, the Eternal your God, am holy’” (Leviticus 19:2). Among the many commandments that follow this introduction are: show deference to one’s parents; observe Shabbat; leave portions of the field and the vineyard for the poor and for the Levite; do not steal; do not lie; do not delay paying a worker’s daily wages; do not mislead an unsuspecting and unknowing person; do not stand by idly while your fellow is in distress; do not hate in your heart; do not take revenge and do not bear a grudge; do not gossip; love your neighbor as yourself; do not plant forbidden mixtures of seeds; do not make tattoos; love the convert; and many more.

6. *Sanctity in Family Life* Over and above sanctity expressed in time, place, and the act of eating, family relations are a matter of sanctity as well. An extensive list of forbidden sexual relations begins with the following statement: “Consecrate yourselves and you shall be holy, for I am the Eternal your God” (Leviticus 20:7). There follow prohibitions against cursing one’s parents, adultery, incest, homosexual relations, bestiality, relations with a menstruant, and eating forbidden animals, fowl, or crawling creatures. The section concludes with the instruction: “And you shall be holy to me, for I—the Eternal—am holy, and I have separated you from the nations, to be [dedicated] to Me” (Leviticus 20:26).

7. *Sanctity in Thought and Belief* The above is a mere sampling of the notion of the sacred as it appears in the Torah, for our sole intent here is to point to the connection between God’s commandments in all areas of human life and the striving for sanctity. We conclude this section with one more explicit link between *mitzvot* and sanctity. This source refers generally to all of the *mitzvot*, as well as to two

specific aspects of Jewish life. The third paragraph of the Shema, recited twice daily, reads as follows:

And the Eternal said to Moses, “Speak to the Israelites and tell them that throughout the generations [to come] they are to make fringes on the corners of their garments, with a blue string on each fringe. It shall be your fringe and you shall look at it, and you shall be aware of [i.e., remember] all the Eternal’s commandments, and you shall fulfill them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you go astray. [This is] so that you will be aware of [i.e., remember] and will fulfill all of My commandments, and will be sanctified to your God. I am the Eternal your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Eternal your God” (Numbers 15:37–41).

“So that you will be aware of and will fulfill all of My commandments, and will be sanctified to your God” is as explicit a statement as is possible: we should think about and fulfill God’s commandments so that we may become holy.

This last selection also brings the notion of sanctity specifically to the sphere of one’s heart and one’s mind—that is, it calls on Israel to adopt holy thoughts and beliefs. There are many beliefs abroad in this world, and many belief systems, and different world outlooks, all of which may be reasonable in one sense or another; however, the ones God commands us to adopt are the ones that lead to holiness.

B. Evidence from Rabbinic Institutions

1. *Blessings before Fulfilling Commandments* Our sages of ancient times instituted a large array of blessings to be recited daily, so that Jews would be accustomed to thinking and speaking of God, and thus thanking, revering, and praising God regularly. The standard opening formula of blessings is *barukh atah Adonai, elohenu melekh ha-olam*, “Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe.”

Many of these blessings are part of the daily prayer services. Others are expressions of praise, gratitude, and acknowledgment of our dependence on God, such as the blessings recited before and after eating. Another major category of blessings consists of those that are recited as one begins to fulfill a wide range of commandments, some of Torah origin and others of rabbinic origin. Here is a small sampling of commandments over which a blessing is recited: studying Torah, lighting Shabbat and holiday candles, lighting Hanukkah candles, hearing the sound of the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, dwelling in the *sukkah* on Sukkot, holding the four species on Sukkot, eating *matzah* and *maror* at the *seder*, counting the *omer*, circumcision, redeeming the firstborn, ritual hand-washing upon rising in the morning and before breaking bread for a meal, donning *tallit* and *t'fillin*, and many more. Each blessing recited before the performance of a *mitzvah* begins with the six words above, and continues *asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivvanu*, “who has sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us,” and concludes with reference to the specific *mitzvah* about to be performed (for example, *lishmo'a kol shofar*, “to hear the sound of the shofar”). Thus the sages clearly instituted a regular reminder that God has sanctified us through the commandments, and that this is their purpose.

2. *The Silent Standing Prayer (Amidah)* Our sages also instituted fixed prayer services to be recited on Shabbat and holidays, morning, afternoon, and night. Those prayers include the following line: “Our God and God of our ancestors...sanctify us through Your commandments (*kad'sheinu b'mitzvotekha*).” Every holiday and high holiday prayer that the sages instituted includes the following praise and gratitude to God, acknowledging the special relationship with the Israel: “You chose us from among all of the nations, You loved us and You wanted us, and You elevated us above all the languages (i.e., cultures), and You sanctified us through Your commandments (*kiddashtanu b'mitzvotekha*).” There can be no doubt that the sages of classical antiquity understood that a life lived fulfilling God’s commandments has as its purpose the creation of holy people—both as individuals and as a nation.

C. Implications for Understanding the Commandments

Thus all arguments of the following type are clearly based on a false premise: “The purpose of the ancient Torah and rabbinic commandments was sociological, or psychological, or economic, or political, or to promote private and public health and hygiene, or to promulgate justice and universal ethical values, etc.; and since such purpose is no longer relevant—since it has been met, or since it can be met better in other ways—therefore, such commandments are no longer applicable.” As the premise of that argument is false, so is its conclusion. The ultimate goal of the commandments is to promulgate holiness (as we shall describe below). Thus they are eternally binding on the Jewish people, as components of the eternal covenant between God and Israel.

The following question, then, naturally arises. If it is so clear that sanctification is the aim of the commandments, then why have so many Jewish thinkers over the generations suggested sociological, psychological, economic, political, hygienic, ethical, or other reasons for the *mitzvot*? I will suggest a different answer to this question in Part II; here, let me simply raise two other points. First: in a brutal, harsh, evil, unstable world of exile, most Jewish efforts had to be directed toward physical and cultural survival. In such circumstances, the possibility of sanctification (as I will describe it below) may have seemed distant and unimaginable. In a world in which Jewish values, beliefs, and practices came under steady, withering, hostile attack from all sides, support for their legitimacy had to be provided from the areas of life that were most easily, immediately, and closely observable and most widely accepted as legitimate: sociology, psychology, economics, hygiene, education, etc. Indeed, different aspects of the *mitzvot* speak to different aspects of human life; thus, different people may find meaning in *mitzvot* in different ways, and a single individual may find different meanings in the same *mitzvah* at different times in his or her life. Second: one must remember that even those great Jewish minds that found numerous visible, sensible values in the *mitzvot* did not claim that their proposals were the sole reasons for the *mitzvot*.

They would certainly not subscribe to the false reasoning above, concluding that one should abrogate the commandments. A well-known example of this is Maimonides' suggested general purpose for animal sacrifices: that the Torah intended to wean the Israelites gradually from idolatrous practices.¹² The natural, logical conclusion that one would expect in light of such an explanation would be that animal sacrifices would never return to Jewish practice. Nevertheless, Maimonides states clearly that they will be restored.¹³

It seems that the principal way to understand Jewish thinkers' seeking reasons other than sanctity as the aims of the *mitzvot* is as Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook wrote:

One must not consider at all innovating details [of Jewish law] based on the [commandments'] reasons. This applies even to those reasons stated by our sages, of blessed memory, the authors of the Talmud, and, similarly, the reasons of Maimonides, and a *fortiori* the reasons given by later thinkers. The only value this entire matter [suggesting reasons for the commandments] has is [to serve] as words of encouragement and inspiration toward ethics and proper beliefs, and not to make them a basis for innovations or scholarly analyses.¹⁴

The purpose of attributing various reasons to *mitzvot* was to encourage their observance, not to replace the true understanding of their purpose—which, as we have seen, was intended to further the pursuit of holiness. Those Jewish thinkers surely did not intend their ideas to be used as the basis for rejecting God's commandments.

Part II: The Meaning of Holiness and How *Mitzvot* Can Help Achieve Holiness

A. The Meaning of Sanctity

Since we are called upon to be holy, “for I, the Eternal your God, am holy,” it seems appropriate to examine briefly what we mean when we say that God is holy.

1. *God's Holiness: Transcendental Yet Immanent* God's holiness has two apparently contradictory aspects. On the one hand, God is ultimately and absolutely transcendental. There is no aspect of this universe to which God can be likened: God is unique. God is not "in" space-time, nor composed of material, nor any of the kinds of "energy" we associate with matter. These statements are subsumed under the first set of fundamental Jewish beliefs about God enumerated by Maimonides. Yet space-time-matter-energy is all that our senses know in this universe. This transcendental nature of God—as absolutely Other, as completely apart, separate, and different—is the thought usually associated with God's holiness. Yet, on the other hand, without God's immanent presence, there could be no universe. God provides the non-space-time-matter-energy infrastructure on which our universe of space-time-matter-energy rests. From the vastest extent of our immense universe, into whose distant recesses we peer back in time through our telescopes (the light "particles/waves" that reach us from the most distant objects began their trajectories through space on their way to our instruments and our eyes billions of years ago, such that we see the spatially distant objects from which that light emanated only as they were very long ago in time), down to the infinitesimally small spaces (Planck lengths, that have never been observed); from the several different types of energy we have come to recognize to what appear to be the densely, tightly packed bundles of energy we call atomic and subatomic particles—all of this exists because of God's free choice to create the universe. The Kabbalists speak metaphorically of a divine spiritual "light" emanating from God, which "supports" all of space-time-matter-energy "from within." By way of contrast, there is a fundamental asymmetry in the relationship between God-the-Creator and the universe that God created: God's existence is absolute, independent, and not contingent on the existence of the universe.

This apparent contradiction is a major theme in our daily public prayers. The theme of the third blessing of every Amidah is God's *k'dushah*, holiness. When the prayer leader repeats this blessing aloud in public prayer, we quote Isaiah 6:3: "Holy, holy, holy is the Eternal

One of Hosts; the fullness of the entire earth is God's glory." The classic Aramaic paraphrase of this verse, quoted elsewhere in our daily prayers, suggests that the threefold repetition of *kadosh*, "holy," indicates God's absolute transcendence beyond time, beyond matter, and even beyond all that we humans experience as abstract "energy." Yet Isaiah's prophetic vision continues, speaking of God in relation to the multitudinous hosts of the world, and concludes with God's immanence, "the fullness of the entire earth is God glory!"¹⁵

This verse is also recited in the first of the two blessings preceding the morning recitation of the Shema, which focuses on God's creation of the world and concludes with the words, "Blessed are You, Eternal, Creator of lights."¹⁶ Similarly, the expanded paragraph of this first blessing, as it is formulated in the Shabbat morning service, is based on a verse from Hannah's prayer: "None is sacred like the Eternal, for there is nothing without You; and there is no Rock (alternatively: Creator) like our God" (1 Samuel 2:2).¹⁷ All other sacred things may be set apart from everything else, but God's sacredness is unique, for nothing could exist if God were to separate from the world completely; God's unique sacredness includes being simultaneously both transcendent and immanent.¹⁸

Continuing our attempt to understand God's holiness, let us examine an aspect of God's immanence that is even deeper and more significant than God's role as creator and maintainer of the material universe in which we live—namely, God's manifestation in this universe in relation to human beings in a specifically non-space-time-matter-energy way. This is the intuitive, spiritual experience we have of a relationship with God, as a free "personality." The Talmud reports the following five-fold link between God and the human soul:¹⁹

To what do the five times David said "O my soul, bless the Eternal"²⁰ correspond? To the blessed Holy One and to the soul. Just as God fills the world, so too does the soul fill the body. Just as the blessed Holy One sees but is invisible, so

too does the soul see but is not seen. Just as the blessed Holy One nourishes the entire world, so too does soul nourish the entire body. Just as the blessed Holy One is pure, so too the soul is pure. Just as the blessed Holy One dwells within the innermost recesses, so too does the soul dwell within the innermost recesses. May the soul, which has these five properties, praise God, to whom one can attribute these five properties!²¹

We human beings have a God-like soul, which enables us to sense something beyond this universe of space-time-matter-energy. That intuitive sense opens the way for our spiritual link to God.

We have struggled for millennia against numerous forms of idolatry—some crude and primitive, and others more sophisticated—which perceived of God as material or, in some way, belonging to this natural world or being identical with it. In the course of our struggle, we have sometimes fallen victim to a greater danger: obscuring God's personality.²² Two fundamental cornerstones of Jewish faith are belief in the freedom of God and the freedom of human beings.²³

We can learn a great deal about the nature of our personal relationship with God from the nature of our personal relationships with other free human beings. One similarity results from our being “others” to each other: just as we cannot know what is going on in someone else's mind unless the other lets us know, so we cannot know what God has in mind, unless God lets us know. Another similarity results from our freedom: each individual's freedom places restraints on the freedom of every other individual. Free agents may influence the external actions and internal states of others in many ways, from mild to highly aggressive and even coercive. Yet one free agent cannot dictate to another what the other desires; to do so would contradict the notion of freedom.²⁴ On the other hand, once a free agent has expressed his or her own preferences, another free agent can relate to such expressions of preferences in any way he or she chooses—from joyful acceptance to grudging submission, or even to outright

stubborn rejection and resistance. In the context of our authentically free relationship with God, this means that only God can express what God wants,²⁵ while we have been created with the freedom to relate to God's preferences as we choose.

2. *Human Holiness and the Commandments* Since we are called upon to be holy, "for I, the Eternal your God, am holy," it appears that we are called upon to emulate both paradoxical aspects of God's holiness, as best we can. That is, while remaining fully engaged with this world of space-time-matter-energy, we are to live in a way that demonstrates transcendence—the presence in our lives of a spiritual dimension that is free, that is not subject to the limitations and restrictions of space-time-matter-energy, the material "laws of nature." We are called on to do this both individually and as a nation.

Indeed, the ninth explicit, concrete positive commandment in Maimonides' *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* will help understand our subject. In this work, Maimonides first lists the commandments to affirm God's existence as the First Cause and God's unique oneness, and the commandments to love, to revere, and to worship God through prayer and Torah study (which are the fundamental commandments that bridge the gap between God's transcendence and immanence). The next three commandments Maimonides lists are: to associate with the wise in every possible way so as to learn from their knowledge, their character traits, and their behavior; to take oaths only in God's name, since all truths must be attributed to the Divine; and to strive to be as God-like as possible (e.g., compassionate, righteous, etc.). Maimonides then writes:

[The ninth commandment is] the commandment that we were commanded concerning sanctifying the name [of God], which was expressed by God saying, "And I shall be sanctified in the midst of the Israelites" (Leviticus 22:32). What this commandment is about is that we are commanded to disseminate this true religion (as described in the preceding commandments) to the multitudes...

A life of *mitzvot* is the means by which we become holy, infusing a fully engaged natural human life, immersed in space-time-matter-energy, with an awareness of the immanent presence of God in the world, and thus disseminating the truth of our Jewish convictions and commitments.²⁶ We do this by exercising our own free wills in an encounter with God's freely expressed will—that is, the commandments.

3. *Rabbi Kook: Mitzvot Are the Means, Holiness Is the End* Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook wrote about the relationship between *mitzvot* and holiness in the context of the talmudic discussion concerning the Hanukkah lights²⁷ (among other places). In that discussion, the Talmud presents the blessing instituted by our ancient sages to be recited before lighting the candle: “Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us through His commandments, and commanded us to light the Hanukkah candle.” In that discussion the Talmud also distinguishes between *mitzvah*, commandment, and *k'dushah*, holiness. Lighting Hanukkah candles is a *mitzvah*, but the candles have no *k'dushah*. Rabbi Kook expands on this as the distinction between the means—namely, the *mitzvot*—and the end—in this case, *k'dushah*.

Holiness, wrote Rabbi Kook,²⁸ is the ultimate goal of life, a self-validating and self-justifying way of living. Holiness must not be thought of as a means for achieving any end other than itself.²⁹ Holiness is an uninterrupted God-consciousness: the awareness of the exalted glory of God engraved deeply in one's heart, the internalization of the truth that the glory of a human being and the splendor of one's soul are directly proportional to the degree to which God's glory is grasped—even if only approximately—within one's soul. This is why no personal benefit or private pleasure of any kind may be derived from something that is holy: to make it clear that no personal pleasure, no advantage of any kind, can be thought of as the purpose of holiness. Holiness is the impression created in the soul by the glory of God; it is the ultimate purpose of creation, greater than any other good that one can imagine or any pleasure

that one can call to mind. By way of contrast, *mitzvot* are the means God provided for preparing all of humanity and every individual for the supreme, ultimate goal: sanctity. *Mitzvot* prepare one's soul—both its capabilities for action and its personal qualities—for that ultimate good which humanity and individuals will achieve at some future time, when they reach their final state of perfection. Thus, Rabbi Kook wrote, one should not attribute to *mitzvot* the same value as to holiness. If one were to equate the value of *mitzvot* with that of sanctity, seeing *mitzvot* as an end unto themselves, then the performance of *mitzvot* would not stimulate a person to wonder about the ultimate aim and purpose of *mitzvot*. The *mitzvot* lead us to the path of goodness and life, to what Rabbi Kook referenced as the supreme light that God hid within the living Torah. Thus *mitzvot* are “sacred” only because of the ultimate goal, sanctity, that *mitzvot* help achieve.

Since *mitzvot* are a means to an end, Rabbi Kook continued, one does not have to avoid the thought that *mitzvot* may also serve as means to other beneficial ends, besides their ultimate goal (unlike the case with *k'dushah*, as we have described above). The problem with this, however, is that one might think that the *mitzvot* have “lower aims.” For example, one might think that their purpose is only to bring humankind to material perfection, or merely to elevate humankind out of its primitive, wild state. If one looks at *mitzvot* this way, they could appear as inferior and contemptible to those generations that had already risen to a higher level of human civilization, beyond the abominations of idolatry and its associated activities. One must realize that divine *mitzvot*—which are wonderful, wise counsel from omniscient God, designed to lead humankind to eternal success—have sublime, lofty missions. These are so elevated that even when humankind achieves perfection of character and true intellectual perception and awareness, there will still be in the *mitzvot* eternal glory and beauty.

In light of this introduction, Rabbi Kook explained the halakhic limitations placed on two different *mitzvot*, which the Talmud

explained on the basis of the principle “so that the *mitzvot* will not be contemptible in one’s eyes.” We will gain further insight into holiness as the goal of observing God’s commandments by considering the following two examples.

The first example is as follows: “It is forbidden to count out coins by the light of the Hanukkah candle.”³⁰ The Hanukkah lights serves to remind us of the miracle of the continued national existence of the Jewish people. Using them to count out coins would be equivalent to seeing the value of the national existence of the Jewish people in the private pleasures that it affords each individual. Attributing this inferior purpose to the *mitzvah* degrades it. Only an uncouth person would think that the highest mission of the candle is to provide light for counting coins. Since money is the principal vehicle for satisfying private, individual desires, this thought-process would reduce the bond of Jewish peoplehood to a group arrangement whose purpose is simply to enable each individual to achieve his or her private material goals. One must realize, instead, that the existence of the Jewish people is for higher, loftier purposes: sanctifying the name of God and living the covenant with God that is Israel’s Torah—thus effectuating God’s promise to Israel of an eternal national existence that is more powerful, sublime, and exalted than that of any other nation and culture. Degrading the higher purpose of even one *mitzvah*, like the continued existence of the Jewish people, could easily spread to other *mitzvot*.³¹

The second instance discussed in the Talmud there, of a *halakbah* based on the principle of not degrading *mitzvot*, concerns the *mitzvah* of covering the blood of a kosher bird or non-domestic animal that has been ritually slaughtered. The Talmud states that one may not cover the blood by pushing the covering material over the blood with one’s feet, “so that *mitzvot* will not become contemptible in one’s eyes.”³² Rather, one must use one’s hands to scatter the cover over the blood. Rabbi Kook explains this as follows: at first blush, the purpose of this commandment appears to simply be preventing people from eating blood, and from eating *over* blood³³—idolatrous practices that

remained from humanity's primitive, wild days. Indeed, it was surely one of the Torah's aims to elevate humankind from those depths. However, that cannot be the ultimate goal of this commandment; humankind has yet to rise much higher, to a future of even greater grandeur and holiness. Rabbi Kook wrote that while it was impossible to describe in detail the light of human morality that will shine at the future messianic time, he could speculate that one day human beings will rise to so high a moral sensibility that killing animals for food will be totally unacceptable, as it had been from the time of Adam until the Flood. For the present and the foreseeable future, human beings are not ready for such a prohibition; humanity still has a long way to go before being ready for such a step.³⁴ However, only the Torah's guidance can lead people toward holiness. The practice of covering the spilled blood will—gradually, over the course of many generations—slowly impress on human beings that spilling animals' blood for human benefit is a cause for shame, permitted only as a concession to the current low level of human morality. This *mitzvah* applies only to the blood of birds and non-domestic animals, who procure their own food and do not depend on humans for their very lives. The lesson about not killing animals will thus be more readily absorbed in human consciousness with respect to these creatures. Moreover, the blood must be covered using the same part of the body—the hand—that spilled the blood, to underscore the connection in one's heart between spilling the blood and subsequently covering of the blood in shame. One must not cover the blood using one's foot, as that would wrongly imply that the *mitzvah* had only a primitive, inferior purpose, making the *mitzvah* contemptible—thus impeding the fulfillment of its ultimate purpose, of raising human beings to holiness.

One often hears the suggestion that the purpose of many *mitzvot* is to keep the Jewish people separate from other nations, and that “separateness” is the “holiness” that those *mitzvot* engender. That is undoubtedly an important goal of many *mitzvot*. After all, Jews are one of the smallest nations on earth; without consciously separating ourselves from other nations, assimilation would surely have already

brought about our complete disappearance. Undoubtedly, the numbers of Jews lost to assimilation, over the millennia, far exceeds the numbers lost to any other cause. Nevertheless, I believe that Rabbi Kook would see that purpose—mere survival—as one of the inferior purposes that has been attributed to *mitzvot*. Surely our survival is for the sake of a much higher form of sanctity—that is, living at once in this world and in the divine presence.³⁵ I will now present two ways in which *mitzvot* serve the purpose of leading to holiness.

B. How *Mitzvot* Can Help Achieve Holiness

I will now present two ways in which *mitzvot* serve the purpose of leading to holiness.

1. *Mitzvot—Natural and Beyond* All of God’s commandments concern natural human behavior in this world. Indeed, there is nothing unnatural about any of the *mitzvot*. On the other hand, there is no *mitzvah* that is only natural: either the *mitzvah* as a whole or the way it is formulated, or some crucial detail of its observance, imposes limitations or requires that we make choices from among several “natural” options. A person might ask, “Why am I doing (or not doing) this? It isn’t natural! Other people don’t do (or refrain from doing) this!” or “Why am I doing this in this way (or: at this time)? It’s not natural! Other people don’t do it this way (or at this time)!”

Stimulating these questions is critically important in order for *mitzvot* to accomplish their ultimate purpose.³⁶ And whether the answers that are proposed are of a lower nature or of a higher nature, as Rabbi Kook described, the main point will be this: we are immersed in the natural world and engaged in it fully, yet there are things we do that go beyond mere nature. That is because the *mitzvot* are the means by which we imbue our immanent, natural world with an awareness of what is beyond, what is transcendent. This is how we bring holiness—an awareness of our immanent/transcendent God—into our lives in this world. Let us mention briefly a few examples of this.³⁷

It is natural to eat. As long as one has food, it is neither natural nor unnatural to refrain from eating certain specific foods. So a Jew may, for example, ask, “Why do I not eat pork? Other people do!” The very question makes one aware that while eating is a natural act, what and how one eats goes beyond what is natural. It brings into the act of eating a dimension beyond the natural. It makes all eating a religious, spiritual act of doing something that is beyond space-time-matter-energy. This is the first step by which *mitzvot* bring holiness into this fundamental, concrete aspect of human life in this world.

It is natural to prepare food with heat before eating it. A Jew who observes the prohibitions of Shabbat may, for example, ask: “Why am I not cooking some rice today? Other people do! I cooked rice myself yesterday; what has changed between then and now?” This question makes a person aware of the fact that, while the progression of time is perfectly natural, there are aspects of how we relate to time that have no basis in nature. It elevates one’s sense of time, by introducing an awareness of a spiritual dimension beyond the merely natural: not all periods of time are the same. Indeed, it makes of the very act of cooking (for example) a spiritual act that goes beyond space-time-matter-energy, for one who cooks is always conscious of the fact that there are times when the activity is permissible and times when it is not. Not only does the Sabbath thus become holy, but even the act of cooking on a weekday takes on an other-worldly aspect, for one has to ask before cooking, “Is today Shabbat?” This is the first step by which we bring holiness—an awareness of our immanent/transcendent God—into the time dimension of our lives in this world.

It is natural for married men and women to have intimate relations. It is neither natural nor unnatural to refrain from relations from time to time. Yet refraining from relations specifically before a woman has immersed in a *mikveh* is not natural *per se*. So Jews who observe the laws of family purity (*tohorat ha-mishpahah*) must ask themselves, both when relations are permitted and when they are prohibited, “Why may we do this now, when we didn’t do this

yesterday? This is such a natural thing to do, and others do it naturally whenever they want to!” This heightens one’s awareness that doing *mitzvot* is a natural thing, but that it is not limited to the realm of what is natural. Thus at any time during a couple’s marriage, both when such relations are prohibited and when they are permissible, the *mitzvah* makes them conscious of the presence within their natural lives in this space-time-matter-energy universe of spiritual considerations that must come from elsewhere. This awareness may not be in the forefront of their consciousnesses during intimacy, but it is surely there in the background.

2. *Mitzvot—Flowing with God’s Expressed Will* The fact that *mitzvot* have a dimension beyond the natural is not sufficient in and of itself to create *k’dushah*, holiness. All human beings bear the imprint of the image of God, and the fact that we have free choice means that any human behavior must have a non-deterministic, spiritual dimension. Indeed, certain aspects of contemporary physics suggest that even space-time-matter-energy may not behave in a strictly deterministic fashion. Furthermore, the diversity of human cultures shows that there are many ways to structure personal, interpersonal, family, and social institutions, including matters such as spiritual beliefs, eating, work, and sexual relations, *inter alia*. One must therefore ask: why should the Jewish way of living be thought of as anything other than just another of many human cultures? Why should it lead Jews and the Jewish people to *k’dushah* more than any other culture?³⁸

The answers to this question touch on fundamental aspects of Jewish faith and commitment, and lie beyond the scope of this paper. For our purposes here, let the following observations suffice. There are several general indications (“proofs”) of the existence of God, including: God as the Creator (an idea that has been reinforced by the current cosmological notion of “the Big Bang”), God as the First Cause (a variation on the notion of Creator—namely, God as the ultimate answer to the question, “Why is the universe as it is?”), God as the Grand Designer (the teleological argument), God as the

source of human morality, and God as the Being than which nothing greater can be conceived (the ontological argument). Each of these relates to a different aspect of God's relationship to the universe, and has had both proponents and opponents for many centuries.

We Jews, while occasionally getting into the fray about the arguments above and others, have our own unique ways of knowing about God. Among them is our national experience of God's revelation at Sinai, which has been passed down authentically and reliably over the generations in an unbroken tradition.³⁹ Others point to our experience with true prophets, and, in particular, with Moses—part of whose prophecy we experienced with him, and whom we then accepted as the closest any human being will ever come to God. Clearly, in these ways we have knowledge of God, of the divine covenant with us, and of the commandments—because God communicated them to us directly in the most reliable way possible, and our sages and our families have passed them forward in an unbroken tradition over the millennia.

The history of our people, as well—unique among the nations of the world—is proof of the covenant between God and us. Part of that covenant was God's undertaking to guarantee the continued existence of our people, after suffering unspeakable horrors in exile. We have, indeed, suffered in exile more than any other nation; and we are, indeed, still here. Current events, such as the establishment of the State of Israel and the ongoing ingathering of our exiles, constitute the initial fulfillment of promises God made to us in the Torah over 3,300 years ago, reinforcing further our conviction that the Torah, the covenant, and the commandments are, indeed, uniquely from God.

Finally, the Torah and the *mitzvot* themselves testify to their divine origin. The values of human freedom and dignity, of justice, of equality before the law, and others enshrined in the Torah, have gained near-universal recognition over the course of the centuries, and continue to grow, albeit ever so slowly, in their genuine application

around the globe. The system of *mitzvot* as expressed in Jewish law and molded by the Oral Torah traditions of millennia are as vital, alive, creative, meaningful, and vibrant today as ever. Countless men, women, and children study the Torah, the Talmud, and other texts of Jewish law intensely every day all around the globe. Their lives are fully engaged with this world, while being immersed in *mitzvot* throughout the course of the day. Every new development at the cutting edge of medicine and technology is immediately examined by brilliant scholars who strive to understand how the innovations blend with traditional Jewish law, which they accept as the word of God.⁴⁰

This is especially true in the State of Israel, where the Jewish people is now again independent and sovereign in its own land. We may no longer relinquish responsibility for politics and government, the economy, international relations, national defense, social policy, national infrastructures, and more, to the host countries of our exile.⁴¹ The Jews of Israel are now responsible for every aspect of our national lives, and the creativity of the Torah world in dealing with all these new challenges is noteworthy. The flowering of Torah literature in recent decades is unparalleled in Jewish history, particularly as it deals with the flood of new technology and the challenges faced by the realities of the new Jewish state. Furthermore, the rich diversity of lifestyles that comes under the heading of “Torah living” and “*mitzvah* observance” is such that these terms cannot really be considered as monolithic, dictating fundamental life choices in a stifling manner. Quite to the contrary, the range of choices can be dizzying! Observing and taking part in this continued and renewed vitality of Torah life, and experiencing the sustained excitement of the revival of our ancient way of living, one can only stand in awe of what can only be a gift from God.

Thus, one who lives the *mitzvot* may be constantly aware, in every possible concrete way, that his or her life in this world stands in an inseparable relationship with God. That is evident in the history of the Jewish people from the time of the exodus and the revelation

at Sinai to this very day—in the growing world-wide recognition of Jewish values and of Jewish beliefs about human beings and the world, and in the ongoing, continuous experience of national and individual vitality, creativity, and contribution to making the world a better place that go hand-in-hand with living a personal life of Torah and *mitzvot*.

God has expressed what we are asked to do in order to attain holiness, through the Torah and commandments, and we now freely decide whether and how to live our lives in accordance with God's will. Since God is transcendent, the only way God and we can “be close” is through our free wills, which are not material and are not predetermined in a fixed way by the laws of nature. The degree to which we freely choose to live lives of Torah and *mitzvot* is the degree to which we connect with God's will—and, hence, with God. Since God is free, only God can express the divine commandments to us. Our freedom to blend our wills with the divine will by studying the Torah and by fulfilling the commandments does not extend to the point of our being able to abrogate the commandments—as if we (and not God) were the source of their authority. Thus God's commandments stand unchanged forever. God is the One who knows how God wants us to achieve holiness and closeness to God.

Thus, observance of the *mitzvot* connects us simultaneously both to this world and to a non-natural world, instilling in us an awareness that the non-natural world to which we are linking is our holy, transcendent, and immanent God. This is how *mitzvot* can lead to holiness, as nothing else can.

Part III: “The Tree of Jewish Life”—An Educational Tool for Teaching about *Mitzvot*, Life, and Holiness

This educational tool consists of a series of drawings of a large tree that has seven major branches. In each drawing in the series, the verse “and you shall be [dedicated] to Me [as] a kingdom of priests and a

holy nation” (Exodus 19:6) is written at the foot of the tree.⁴² In the first drawing in the series the tree is bare, with unmarked branches. In the last, the culmination of an extended period of study, all of the branches are labeled, as are the sub-branches, and the tree is full of leaves, each marking a different theme or specific *mitzvah* or group of *mitzvot*. The drawings are printed on large pages⁴³ to allow for many details to be added during the course of study, so that a total picture of Torah living can be displayed on one large page.

The series of drawings displays the principal *mitzvot* in every one of seven principal areas in which human life takes place. The principal *mitzvot* are revealed to the learner on one branch at a time, without ever losing sight of the total picture. The learners will study the details of each *mitzvah* on each branch and sub-branch, gradually increasing in detail, in a way that is appropriate for the students, the teacher, and the learning context.

Each student is to receive each picture, in order, as the learning progresses.⁴⁴ Sometimes the student will be asked to write on the picture, and at other times he or she will be free to do so as he or she desires. When the learning is complete, each student will have a complete set of eleven drawings.

The series of drawings is designed to give the teacher maximal freedom in deciding what area of life and what *mitzvah* to introduce, at what time, in what order, and in what degree of detail. Furthermore, the teacher can use the series of drawings as a vehicle for expressing his or her own personal understanding of each and every *mitzvah*, and his or her own halakhic and worldview orientation regarding each *mitzvah*. The only two themes that will run of necessity through the entire series of drawings are that *mitzvot* have been given to us in every area of life, and that their ultimate aim is holiness for each individual and for the entire Jewish people.

I will look here at five of the drawings in the series, and describe the others. A comprehensive curriculum of Jewish study can be based

on the series, but I will present here only a few brief samples of what can be done with it.

The first drawing in the series is of the bare tree, with seven unmarked branches and numerous sub-branches on each branch, and the verse at its base. After introducing the basic idea, the teacher may guide the students through a discussion of seven different areas that comprise all of life, as they mark each branch themselves. The areas I have chosen are the dimensions of the universe within which we live: time and space (the first two branches on the lower left), the three principal experiential modes of an individual's personal life: thought, emotions, and the body (the first three branches on the lower right), and the two group frameworks within which each human being experiences the world: the closest group of origin, the family, and the larger groups: community, nation, and all of humanity.

The second drawing to give the students, then, is of the tree, with only the seven main branches marked: time, space, thought/belief, emotion/service, the body, the family, and the community/nation/human race. (See Illustration 1.)

The teacher may then guide the students through marking the secondary branches on each main branch. He or she may do so at this point, moving from branch to branch until all sub-branches are marked. This will be the third drawing to give the students. (See Illustration 2.)

At this stage, the teacher can describe in broad terms both various aspects of Jewish life and a variety of ways of thinking about the *mitzvot*. Thus, for example, I have included both Torah study and prayer as sub-branches on the same branch, "Sanctity of the Heart." A formal basis for doing this is the statement found in the Sifrei and quoted by Maimonides as proof that the commandment "to serve God" is not merely a general instruction, which Maimonides would not normally count in the list of commandments, but rather it has specific operative content: "[The verse that says] 'And to serve

God’—that is prayer; and they also said: ‘And to serve God’—that is Talmud [i.e., Torah study].”⁴⁵ Maimonides also quotes a *baraita* of Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Yose the Galilean: “From what source [do we know] that the basic requirement to pray is one of the *mitzvot*? From here: ‘You shall revere the Eternal, your God, and you shall serve God’ (Deuteronomy 6:13), and they [the sages] said: ‘Serve God through the Torah, serve God in the divine sanctuary.’” Thus both prayer and Torah study are forms of serving God with one’s heart.⁴⁶ This observation leads to the significant conclusion that Torah study is not to be an abstract intellectual experience alone, but is to involve all of the human personality—the heart—in serving God.⁴⁷

At the next stage, the teacher will begin to fill in more specific commandments and areas of Jewish law on the sub-branches. Seven different drawings are useful for this purpose, one for filling in details on each branch while leaving the other branches marked only with their sub-branches. This educational tool is not a substitute for detailed study, but it allows the learner to maintain a broad perspective on life, Jewish living, and holiness as he or she learns the details from other sources, with the help of the teacher. Two of these pages appear here as Illustrations 3 and 4.

Thus, for example, let us consider the drawing in which we begin to fill in the details of the sanctity of time (Illustration 3). The six sub-branches are “Shabbat,” “The Three Biblical Pilgrimage Festivals,” “The Days of Awe,” “The Four Fast Days,” “The Two Holidays of Rabbinic Origin,” and “The Dawn of Our Redemption.” The detailed study of the laws of Shabbat can take a long time, requiring considerable effort. But the tree helps keep things in broad perspective. The leaves show the place of the details that will be studied closely. Thus the *mitzvot* of Shabbat may be broken down in one way into two major parts. One is a study of *zakhbor*, the positive actions that give Shabbat its pleasant and holy atmosphere—including Kiddush and Havdalah, preparing for Shabbat throughout the week, honoring Shabbat with special dress, family meals, Torah study, table songs, and more. The

other major part is the negative commandments referred to by *shamor*—that is, refraining from *m'lakhab*, from forbidden labor, as a declaration that God is Creator and Master of the universe, not we.

The idea of Shabbat also has three other aspects, which are related to the three Shabbat meals and the three Shabbat public prayer services. These refer to the creation of the material world, the giving of the Torah with its spiritual aims, and the peaceful harmony we anticipate for the world at some future date. All of these can be studied while addressing how they contribute to sanctity, and not losing perspective of the place of all this in the total picture of Jewish life.

As another example, consider the drawing in which we begin to fill in the details of the sanctity of the body (Illustration 4). The two major sub-branches are “Foods of Vegetable Origin” and “Foods of Animal Origin,” with another sub-branch with only one leaf, forbidden mixtures. This allows one to maintain a perspective of how this fits into the totality of Jewish life, as one begins to delve into the many details of *kasbrut* observance. As all the details are studied, it is expected that the teacher will remind the students from time to time of the various ways in which each “leaf” on each sub-branch constitutes a means for achieving closeness to God and sanctity, by living according to God’s commandments. So one may learn, for example, about the forbidden sinew, *gid ha-nasheh*, whose prohibition reminds us not to abandon a person, leaving him or her alone and unaccompanied in a dangerous place.⁴⁸ Similarly, one may learn about the various views of how the prohibitions of cooking milk and meat together, and of eating or gaining benefit from such products, can contribute to the heightening of one’s moral sensitivity.

After the student has studied the details of the *mitzvot* at “the level of the leaves” and beyond, in an appropriate measure, the course of study can conclude with a review of all of life, and the *mitzvot* that fill and mold all of Jewish life, and how they lead to that ultimate Jewish aim, *k'dushah*, with the help of Illustration 5. It

shows “The Tree of Jewish Life” with all branches, sub-branches, and leaves marked, showing a comprehensive view of the path to holiness through *mitzvot*.⁴⁹

Summary

We have seen that the Torah and rabbinic sources down to our own day have established that the aim of a life lived in accordance with God’s commandments is sanctification of all of life. We have examined the notion of God’s holiness, and the human holiness that is to be modeled on God’s, and the way in which fulfilling the *mitzvot* can lead to holiness. Finally, we have examined an educational tool that can be used to teach, in a variety of contexts, all of the components of Jewish life, in detail, without losing sight of the all-encompassing nature of Torah living and its ultimate aim, sanctification.

ILLUSTRATION 1
The Tree of Sacred Jewish Life,
Showing the Seven Major Branches

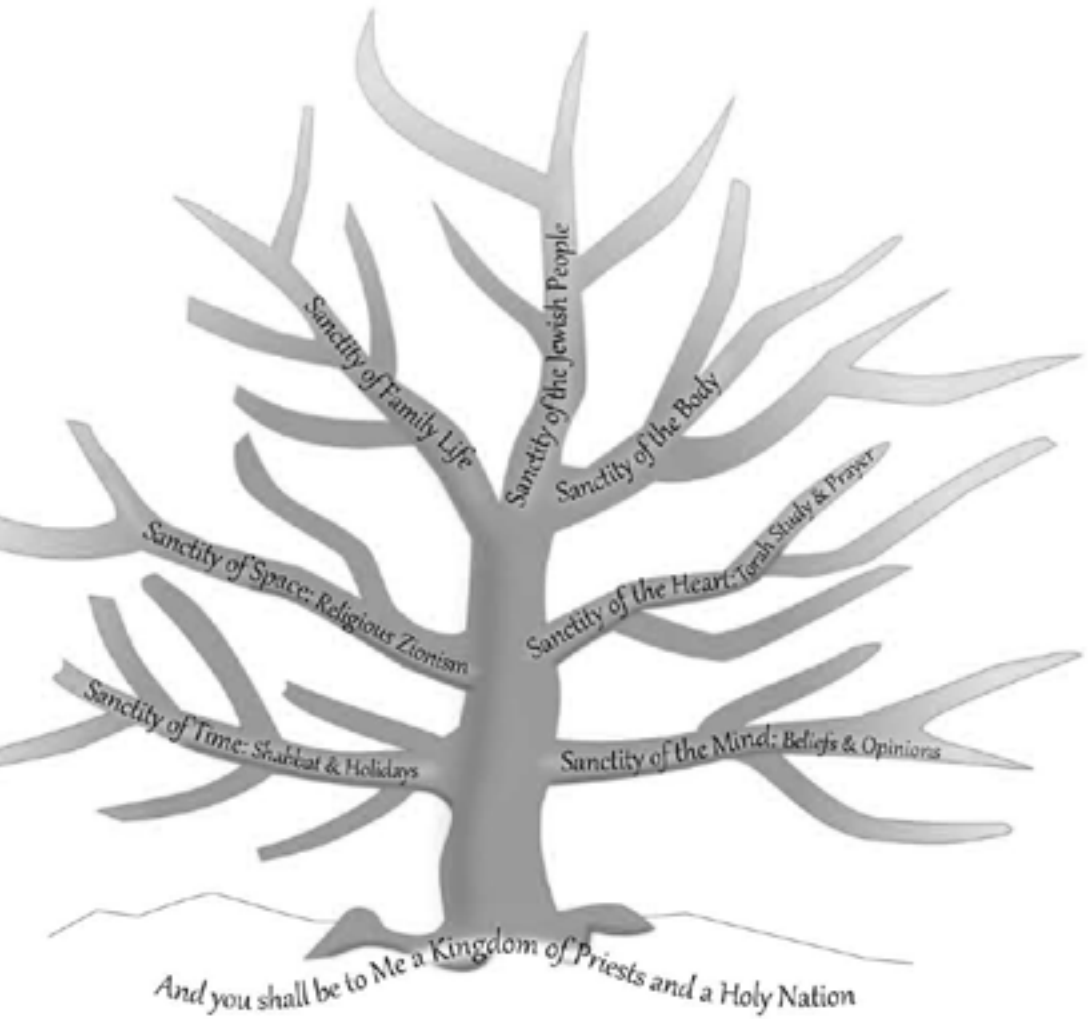
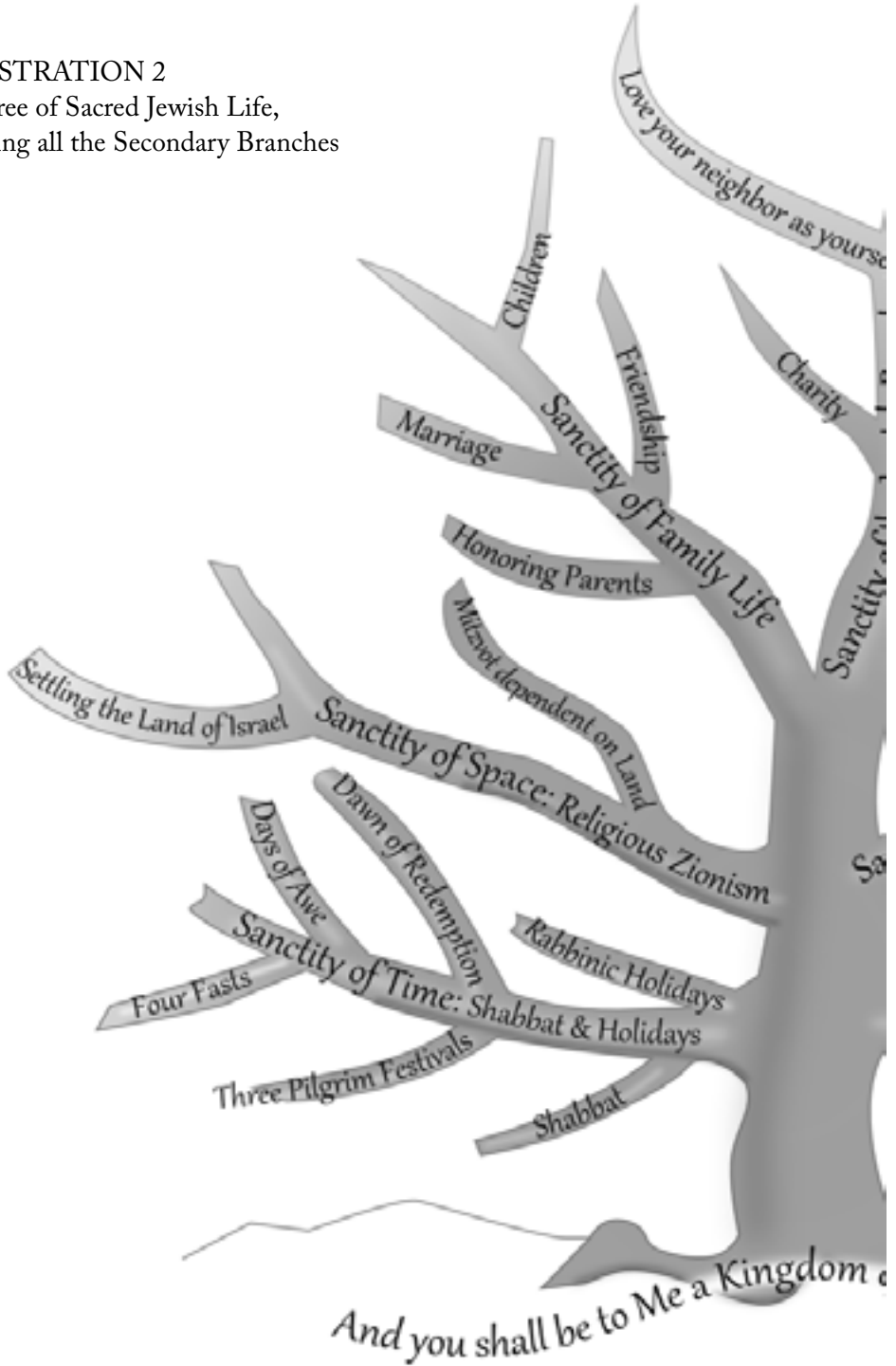


ILLUSTRATION 2
The Tree of Sacred Jewish Life,
Showing all the Secondary Branches



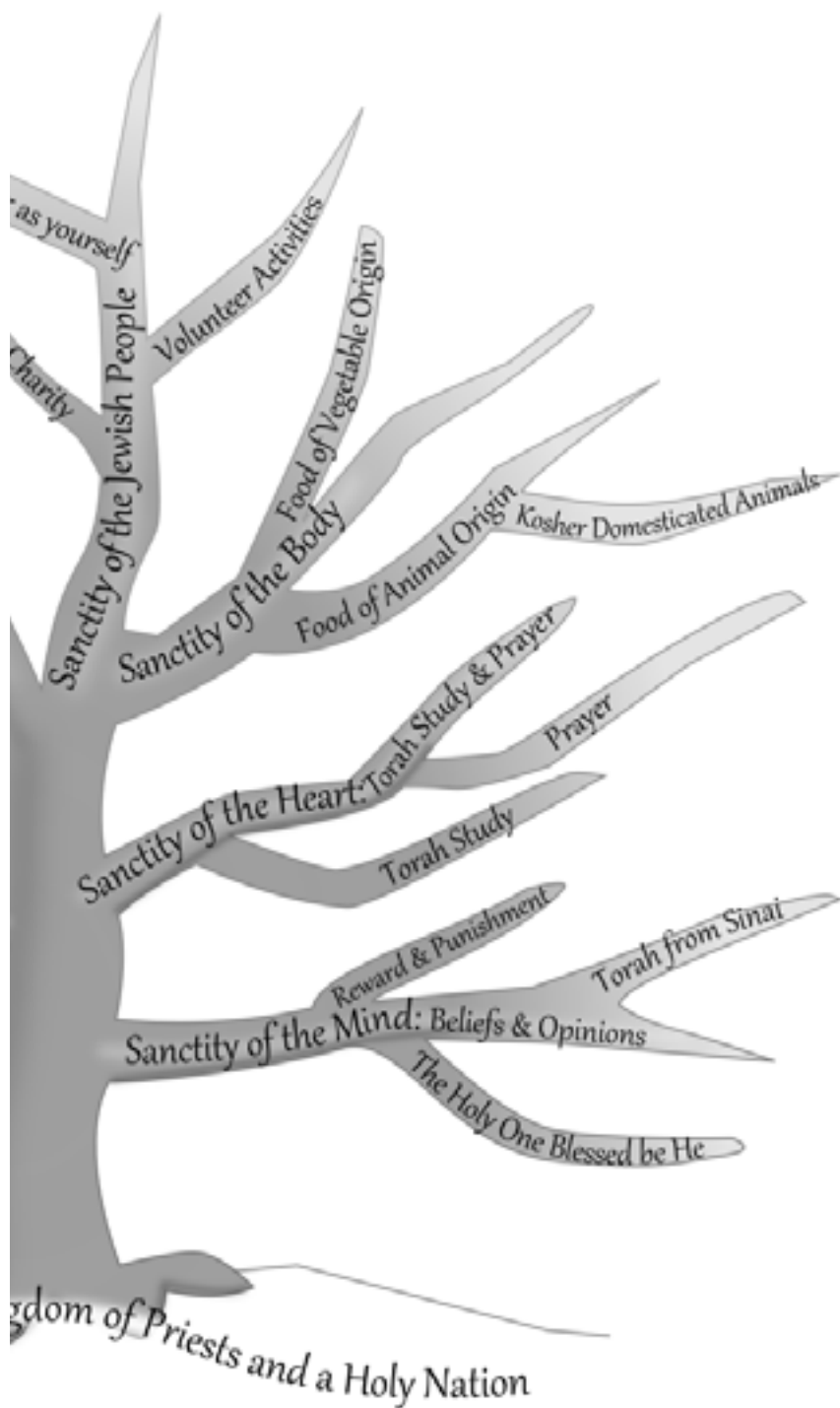


ILLUSTRATION 3
The Tree of Sacred Jewish Life,
Showing Details of Sanctity of Time

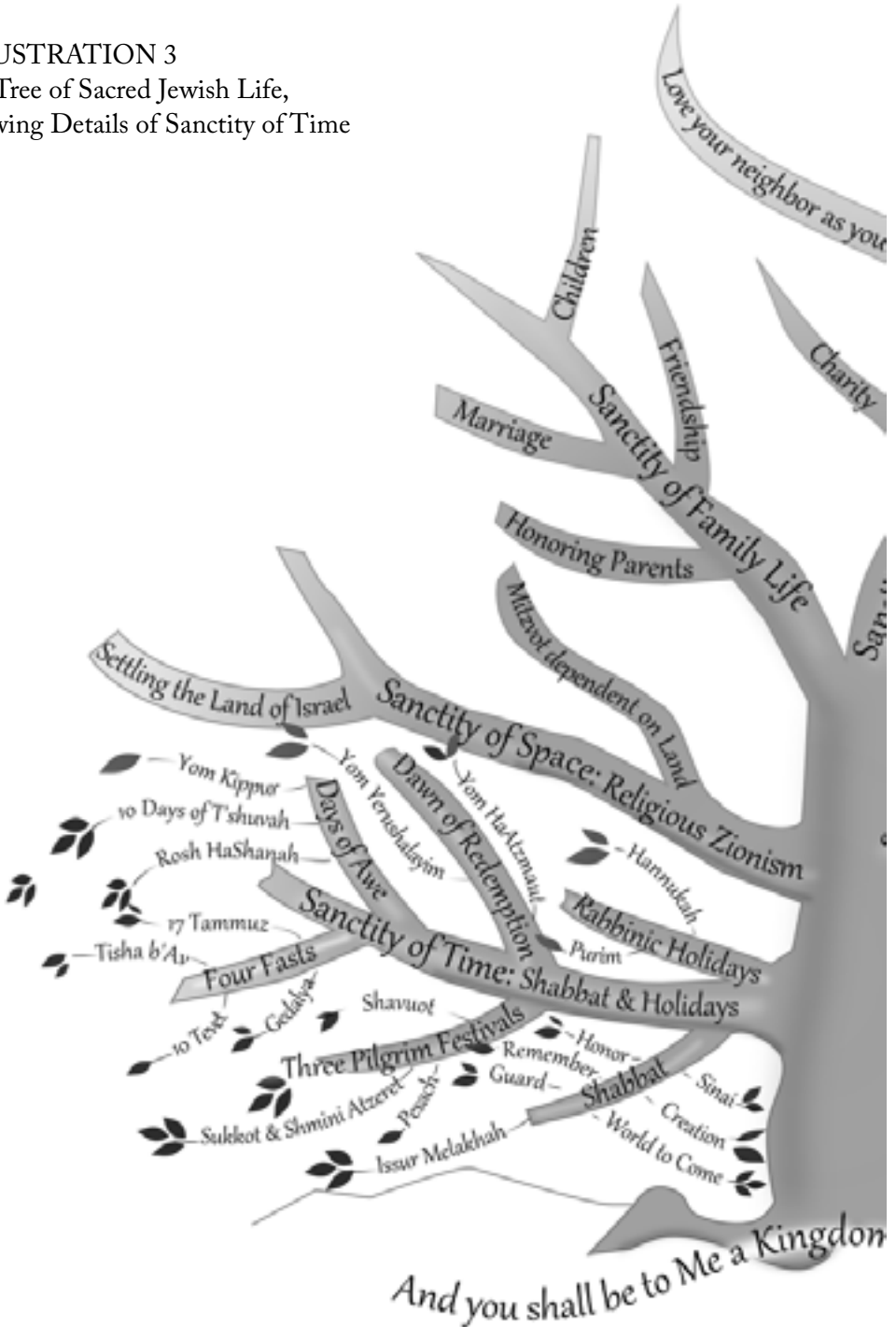
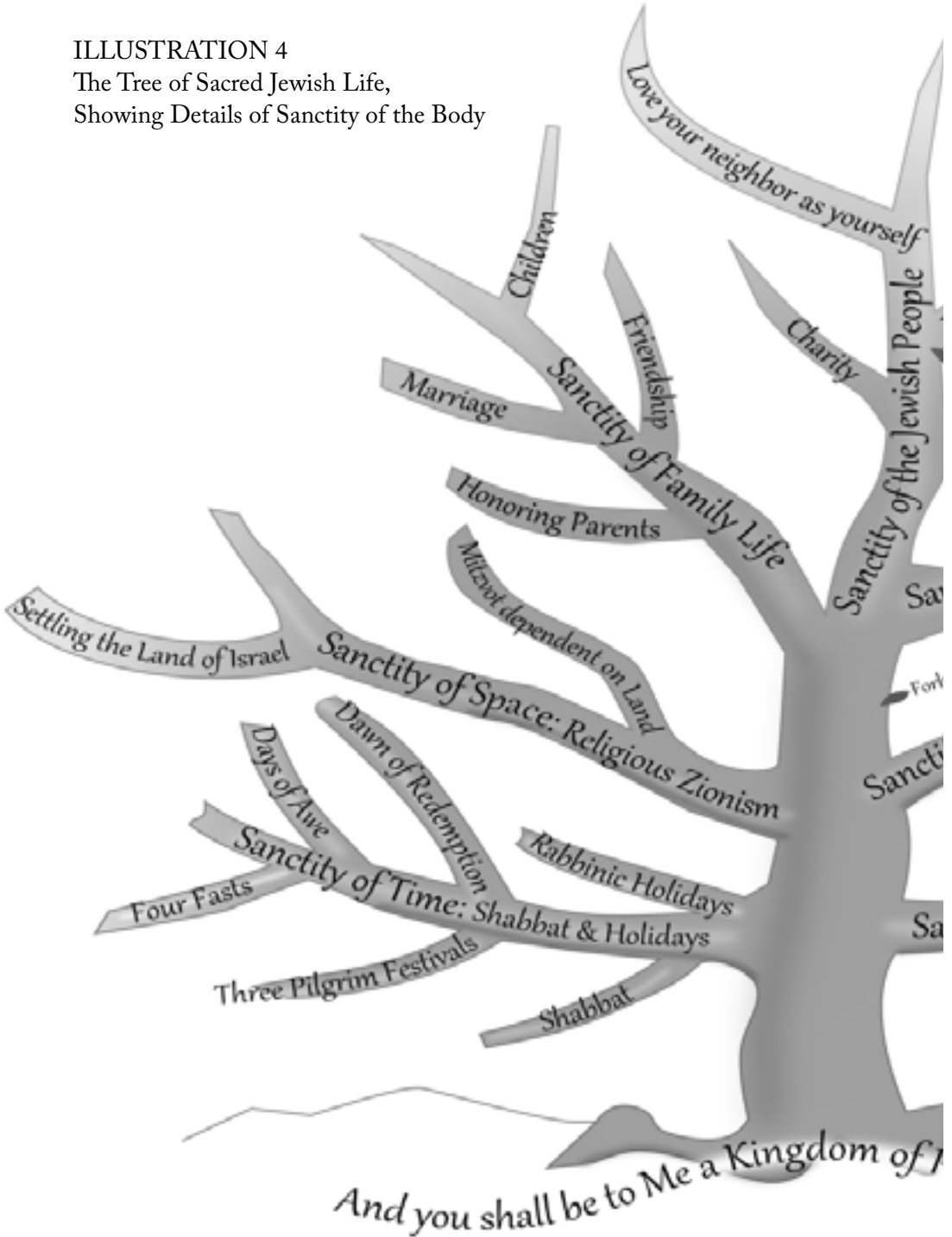
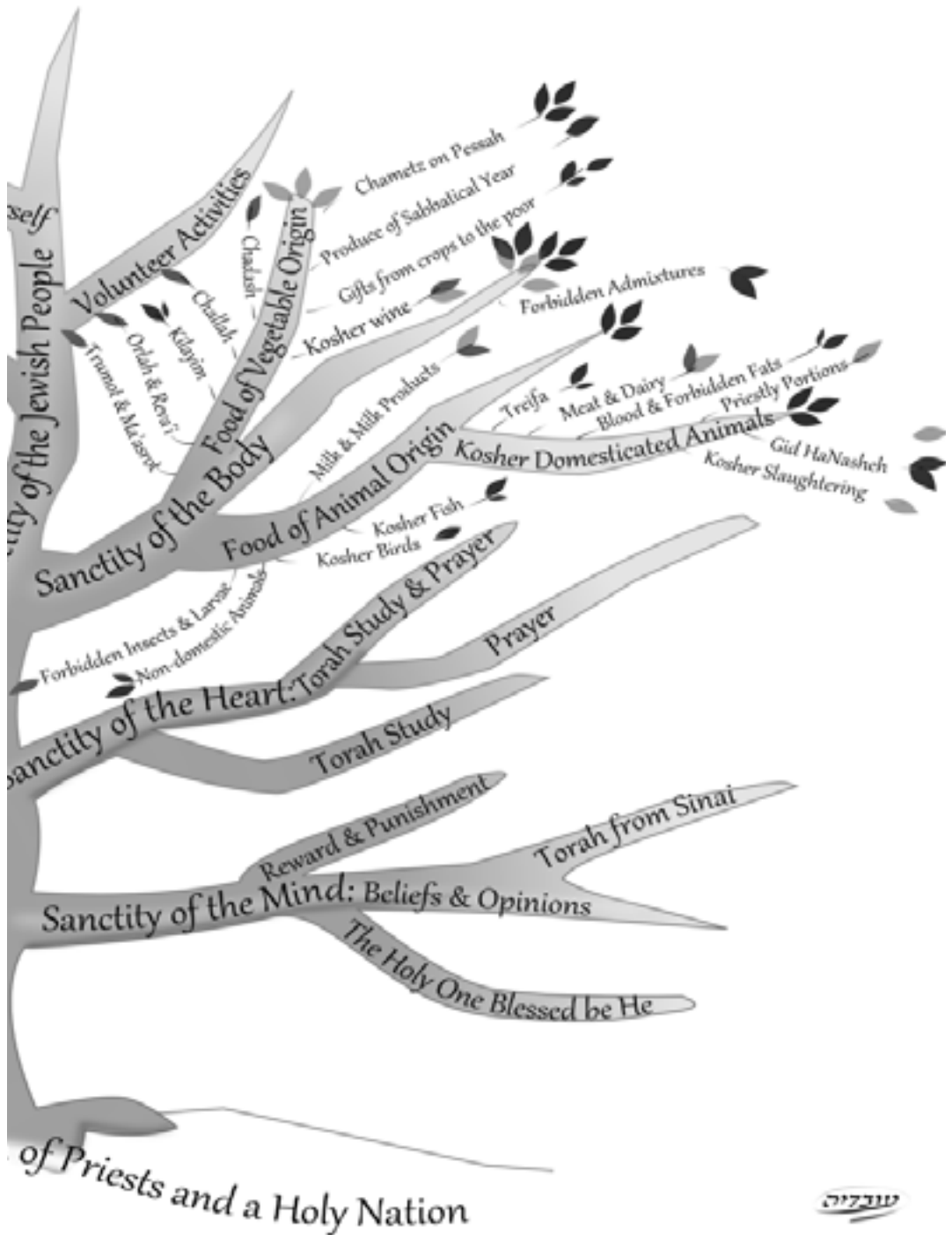




ILLUSTRATION 4
The Tree of Sacred Jewish Life,
Showing Details of Sanctity of the Body





NOTES

¹ This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father, Rabbi Dr. Moshe Mescheloff, and my mother, Rebbetzin Magda Mescheloff.

² We will use the terms sacred, sanctified, and holy and their cognates interchangeably in this essay, as well as the Hebrew terms *kadosh* (holy) and *k'dushah* (holiness).

³ This is only one of several ways of articulating the purpose of God's covenant with Israel. Other ways include "perfecting the world," "being a light unto the nations" (that is, teaching humankind a commitment to monotheism, and a proper balance of justice, righteousness, and mercy), "bringing all people to recognize God's rule," "advancing the cause of God in the world," "bringing us closer to the messianic era," and "earning a place in the world to come." We will show later in this essay that Rabbi Avraham Yitzhak Kook, too, identified *k'dushah*—sanctity or holiness—as the ultimate goal.

⁴ We will use the terms commandment and *mitzvah* (plural: *mitzvot*) interchangeably in this essay.

⁵ *Mitzvot* have the potential to create holiness, but, like any tool, they can be misused and distorted, and may fail to fulfill their potential. Indeed, that has happened repeatedly throughout Jewish history, earning us God's rebuke through the prophets, and bringing upon us exile after exile, including the current long exile, which has not yet ended. To this day, one who so desires can point to the shortcomings of the Jewish people and of individual Jews, even Torah-observant individuals and groups. Creation of holiness through observance of *mitzvot* is a long, challenging process. Therefore, it is unrealistic and unjust to expect full results over the short term, as much as one would like to see more than just the partial results that are evident. The slowness of the process is one reason that *t'shuvah* (repentance) is such an important component of Jewish life, on both the national and individual levels. At first blush, I should have added the word "sadly" after "but" in the first sentence in this note. However, the possibility of misusing *mitzvot*, of their not having the effect of creating sanctity with mechanical certainty, the necessity of *t'shuvah*, and the achievement of *k'dushah* as a process, are all consequences of human beings having free will. The exercise of free will in action, in thought, in belief, and in emotion is the only way that the human spirit, and a relationship with God, can grow authentically and have genuine meaning. Thus it is actually spiritually necessary that *mitzvot* not achieve the goal of sanctity with certainty, automatically or immediately. See notes 24 and 26.

⁶ Although I will speak here of *mitzvot* as a means to achieving sanctity, this is not to say that they have no intrinsic value. To the contrary, I will show in

Part II that the *mitzvot*, as a means to achieving sanctity, share in a measure of that sanctity, so that they do have a degree of intrinsic value. This is one way of understanding the statement of Ben Azzai, “The reward of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*”—that is, the *mitzvah* is its own reward (Pirkei Avot 4:2). Similarly, Maimonides wrote: “One should have no aim in studying wisdom other than knowing it. Similarly, the purpose of the truth is only to know that it is true, and the Torah is true, and the purpose of knowing it is to live it [literally, to do it]” (see the introduction to the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin in his Mishnah commentary). Maimonides expanded on this theme there, and wrote: “The sages warned against this as well—that is, that one should not set anything at all as the purpose of serving God and of performing *mitzvot*.” The *mitzvot* are not to be related to as instruments toward achieving any goal other than their own intrinsic value, Maimonides wrote. They should not even be thought of as instrumental for the purpose of “earning a place in *olam ha-ba* (the world to come),” where the soul survives after the physical death of the body—even though, in fact, *olam ha-ba* will be the natural consequence of *mitzvah* observance. The Torah and the sages spoke of rewards for observing the *mitzvot* only for the educational purpose of encouraging such observance, which is often inconvenient, difficult, and not completely “natural” (see Part II, below). The various “reasons” for various *mitzvot* given by Jewish thinkers over the generations were also intended only to encourage observance (see Part II, below). Thus in this essay we will not adopt a commonly held view, that one studies the Torah and observes *mitzvot* in order to earn *olam ha-ba* (this view is commonly attributed to *M’sillat Y’sharim*). To the contrary, our approach will be completely oriented to our lives in this material world. And, even though we will speak of *mitzvot* as being instrumental (in the sense that they are the means by which to attain holiness), it should become clear in our presentation below of Rabbi Kook’s view that this is not an instrumental approach in the sense that Maimonides opposed; rather, it is a description of the inherent value of *mitzvot* as part of a very long individual and national process.

⁷ The list of thirty-nine characteristic activities included in this term, often mistranslated as “work” (for lack of a better term), has been characterized by Samson R. Hirsch as those activities in which people use their intelligence and practical skills to effect a material change in the world for their own benefit.

⁸ Note the emphasis on “as the Eternal your God has commanded you.” This emphasizes that observing the Sabbath as God’s commandment is what will make it holy; Shabbat is not just a secular day of rest. This verse points toward the Oral Law, where the practical details of the concept of *m’lakbah* are spelled out. In addition, it alludes back to the first report of the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus, thus combining the later commandment to “guard”

Shabbat (*shamor*) with the earlier commandment to be continuously aware of Shabbat (*zakhor*).

⁹ Including, among other things, eating *matzah*, and destroying and not eating *hametz*.

¹⁰ For more on this idea of sacred space within the land of Israel as articulated in the Song at the Sea, see the article by Rachel Friedman elsewhere in this volume.

¹¹ Shoes protect a person's feet from being harmed by numerous dangers to be found on the ground. There is no need to be protected from sacred ground; to the contrary, one should come in direct contact with the holiness that is there, absorb it, and should be protected from harm by the holiness alone. Furthermore, shoes become dirty from all that is on the ground as they protect the feet; it would desecrate holy ground to bring such filth to it.

¹² *Guide for the Perplexed* III 32.

¹³ M.T. Hilkhot Melakhim 11:1. Indeed, in complete consonance with our thesis here, in the course of stating that animal sacrifices were commanded to be brought before God as part of a weaning of the Israelites from idolatry (*Guide*, *ibid.*), Maimonides wrote explicitly that the aim of this process was to enable the ultimate fulfillment of God's charge to the Israelites to become "a nation of priests and a holy people."

¹⁴ *T'humim* (Alon Shevut: Tzomet Institute, 1980), vol. 1, p. 9.

¹⁵ The second and third verses recited in the public Kedushah prayer carry the same complex message. A full study of this blessing and these verses is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁶ It appears that our sages wanted us to do a quick, symbolic review of the Torah before reciting the Shema, for the first of the two blessings relates to the beginning of the first book of the Torah, Genesis, while the second blessing focuses on themes from the last book of the Torah, Deuteronomy.

¹⁷ After the usual opening, praising God "who is the Creator of everything," this blessing continues on Shabbat: "Everything thanks You, everything praises You, and everything says 'None is sacred like God'"—which is a quote of the beginning of this verse from Hannah's prayer. And the section concludes with the words: "None is comparable to You and there is none other than You; there is nothing without You"—the second part of the verse from Hannah's prayer. Thus this paragraph of prayer is framed by the verse from Hannah's prayer, suggesting that the author intended to expand thereby on the theme of the verse. The same theme is reiterated in different ways throughout this blessing: God is simultaneously transcendent and immanent, uniquely sacred.

¹⁸ By way of wordplay, one may suggest the following mnemonic device. Most scholars agree that the Hebrew language is based on three-letter roots as the basic units of meaning, while others suggest that the basic units of meaning are two-letter roots. It seems to me most likely that both are right—that is, some

basic semantic units are two-lettered and some are three-lettered. In any event, it has also been suggested that the basic meanings of at least some of the three-letter roots may be combined from the meanings of two two-letter roots joined together. In this case, the root for “holy,” *kof-dalet-shin*, may be thought of as a combination of *kof-dalet*, meaning “bow” or “worship,” and *dalet-shin*, meaning either “break the outer cover to release what is inside” or “routine, mundane.”

¹⁹ B. Berakhot 10a.

²⁰ In Psalms 103 and 104.

²¹ It is worthy of note that God is called, in this passage, *ha-kadosh barukh hu*, “the blessed Holy One”—for this passage deals with the notion of God’s holiness and God’s connection with human holiness.

²² See Samson Raphael Hirsch’s comment to Genesis 6:6 in his Torah commentary (trans. Isaac Levy; London: I. Levy, 1963), vol. 1, p. 132. While I believe that every non-Jewish aspect of Christian theology is easily disproven and rejected, the one area where many Christians seem to cling to their faith and to which we have only weak responses is just this: the ability to relate to God “personally,” as a person. We have abstracted and de-anthropomorphized God to the point where having a personal relationship with God can be extremely difficult; indeed, it seems to be frequently discouraged. Yet, as Hirsch points out, de-personalizing God is not a necessary Jewish belief. To the contrary, God’s presence in the universe stands in an authentic, highly personal relationship to humanity. I believe it would be to our advantage, in our desire to advance the awareness of God’s presence in the world, to revive our experience of this.

²³ Hirsch, *ibid.*

²⁴ The following aphorism is attributed to Kabbalists: “There can be no coercion in spiritual matters.”

²⁵ Perhaps this perspective provides an insight into the statement of Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa (B. Shabbat 88a) to the effect that God forced the Torah on the Israelites at Sinai. Before the giving of the Torah, they were free to choose how to worship God; but after God gave the Torah and expressed a preference for Israelite behavior and service of God—i.e., the positive and negative commandments—this became a reality that they could not change through their choice. Only God can choose what God wants; people may not dictate God’s commandments to God. However, they are free to choose how to relate to the commandments.

²⁶ Nahmanides, like Maimonides, interpreted God’s call in Leviticus 19:2, “You shall be holy, for I—the Eternal your God—am holy,” as a general call concerning the manner in which all *mitzvot* are to be observed, and not as an individual commandment unto itself. (See Nahmanides’ glosses to the introduction to Maimonides’ *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, the fourth principle). Nahmanides describes this general call to be sacred as a call for a life of self-restraint, going beyond

the letter of the law, refraining from satisfying one's lusts on the grounds that it is technically permissible to do so. Thus, for example, there is holiness in avoiding gluttony while eating permissible foods, avoiding drunkenness while drinking permissible drinks, avoiding excessive sexual activity even within the bounds of marriage, and avoiding foul language and cursing. Similarly, there is holiness in developing admirable character traits (see Nahmanides' commentary to Leviticus 19:2). It is quite possible that Nahmanides' dispute with Rashi concerning the interpretation of this verse was not a matter of principle, but rather a technical matter. Rashi seems to have applied it specifically to observing the commandments of prohibited sexual relations, whereas Nahmanides did not, seeing it with much broader import—i.e., applying to all of the *mitzvot*. In any event, I believe that Nahmanides would agree that all of the commandments are aimed at creating a holy person and a holy people, as I have argued above. I believe, too, that Nahmanides would concur with my presentation here of the relationship between all *mitzvot* and sanctity. His interpretation of the verse "You shall be holy" as an additional, general directive concerning how one is to go about living a Torah way of life only emphasizes that the *mitzvot* have the *potential* for creating a holy person and a holy people, but they may fail to achieve their potential if the way of life in which the *mitzvot* are observed is not appropriate. Indeed, the association of *mitzvot* with repugnant behavior may create a desecration of God's name. For a more detailed treatment of Nahmanides' understanding of holiness, see the essay by Yitchak Blau elsewhere in this volume.

²⁷ *Ein Ayah* (ed. Jerusalem, 1986), Shabbat 2:15, and cf. also 2:22–24.

²⁸ Here and in what follows I will paraphrase what Rabbi Kook wrote, although his rich Hebrew poetic style makes a straightforward translation into English a nigh impossible task.

²⁹ It appears that the notion of a human choice that has no purpose other than itself, advanced also by Maimonides (see note 6), is genuinely foreign to human beings. Thus it seems appropriate to acknowledge the difficulty of this concept, and to be tolerant of the attempts that people make to identify the purpose even of such choices. In the very selection we are discussing, in which Rabbi Kook emphasizes that sanctity has no purpose other than itself and must not be said to have a purpose, Rabbi Kook's opening sentence discusses this very notion: "The difference between *mitzvah* and *k'dushah* is dependent on this, that the purpose of sanctity (*mat'rat ha-k'dushah*) is to plant firmly in a human being the exalted nature and the glory that is appropriate to conjecture in one's heart about everything that concerns the glory of God..."

³⁰ B. Shabbat 22a.

³¹ Rabbi Kook wrote elsewhere about the degradation of pure spiritual ideas and their ultimate revival. See, for example, *Orot Ha-ṭ'šuvah* (Jerusalem,

1924), 12:12. In a long paragraph probably intended as a description of the degradation of the Zionist idea and the inevitable ultimate restoration of its original heavenly greatness, much (but not all) of the description can be applied equally well to the process of attributing to *mitzvot* various purposes other than holiness.

³² B. Shabbat 22a and B. Hullin 87a.

³³ Leviticus 19:26.

³⁴ Rabbi Kook expanded on this idea elsewhere (*inter alia*, see his *Hazon Ha-tzimhonut V'ha-shalom Mi-b'hinah Toranit* (Jerusalem, 1961). He explains that human violence against other humans would be even worse than it is currently, if humans were unable to take out some of their aggressive, violent urges on animals. Thus, taking the lives of animals is a necessary concession at the present time until human beings will rise to a higher level in relation to their fellow humans. Moreover, human beings need to be reminded that they are not animals: unlike animals, humans are not to live merely in accordance with natural drives, instincts, and urges. This distinction between animals and humans is underscored by the fact that it is permissible to take the lives of animals for food, while the murder of humans remains strictly forbidden.

³⁵ In any event, the importance of Jewish separateness is referred to by the sages as *havdalah*, and its central significance is reiterated in the weekly blessing recited at the end of Shabbat and holidays (blessing God for separating us from the other nations, *ha-mavdil...bein yisrael la-ammim*). On the other hand, a midrash such as the following (B'reishit Rabbah 32:77) may refer to Jewish separateness, although I suspect its principal significance is in reference to the sanctity that is our ultimate aim, which we seek to share with God: "Rabbi Berekhiah said in the name of Rabbi Shimon: 'There is none like God' (Deuteronomy 33:26), yet 'Who is like the God of Yeshurun?' [It is our] grandfather, Israel [who is like God, even though none is like God]: Just as it is written about the blessed Holy One, 'And God alone will be exalted' (Isaiah 2:11), so too [is it written about] Jacob, 'And Jacob remained alone' (Genesis 32:25)."

³⁶ Note that the four types of sons enumerated in the Passover Haggadah are characterized according to the questions they ask. They seem to be ranked in descending order, in terms of the sophistication of their questions. The last level (and presumably the lowest) is that of the son who does not know how to ask at all. The Haggadah suggests that such a child be stimulated to ask questions, even by "spoon-feeding" the questions to him. For example, a parent might say, "You might have thought that I should have begun telling you about this at the beginning of the month..." or "You might have thought that I should have begun during the day..." No Jewish spiritual growth is possible without asking questions.

³⁷ The three examples I will give here illustrate a certain type of negative commandment. Many negative commandments prohibit evil behavior, such

as idolatry, murder, incest, theft, or giving false testimony. However, the aim of other negative commandments is to mold desirable behavior in such a way as to make it holy. Examples of such commandments include the dietary laws (which insist that we refrain from eating certain foods), the laws of Shabbat (which insist that we refrain from performing *m'lakhab* on the seventh day), and the laws of family purity (which insist that we refrain from sexual intimacy at certain times).

³⁸ It is surely not my intention here to denigrate all the non-Jewish human cultures of the world. Each people makes its unique contribution to humanity, every individual is created in the image of God, and the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come. Here we are attempting to express the unique contribution to humanity that can be made by the Jewish people, who are, indeed, recognized by significant portions of humanity as the people with a special, ancient covenant with God. I argue here that the unique contribution of Israel lies in fulfilling God's charge to be "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Indeed, the system of *mitzvot* is binding only on the Jewish people, not on all peoples of the earth. It should be noted that the thesis presented here is independent of the view of Yehudah Halevi that the Jewish people have an innate proclivity toward the holy and the divine; that is, this thesis holds whether or not one agrees with that view.

³⁹ This view is generally ascribed to Yehudah Halevi, in his *Kuzari*.

⁴⁰ The announcement of the demise of Torah study and *mitzvah* observance, and the declaration that they are out-of-date, primitive, and stuck in a past that will never return, have been repeated and disproven so often that one can only conclude that those who repeat them are stuck in the past themselves, refusing to see the thriving, genuine, faithful Jewish living and learning taking place right before their eyes.

⁴¹ As much as we have contributed and continue to contribute in all of these areas, as loyal citizens, in all of our host countries around the world, nowhere is all of the responsibility and the authority ours as they are in the State of Israel.

⁴² A full set of drawings in Hebrew was prepared originally by my sister, Renah Bell, a talented graphic artist, calligrapher, and art instructor. I have used them in teaching in Israel. The drawings in English were redesigned in a new, original formal especially for this book by my multi-talented friend, Ovadyah.

⁴³ I recommend using at least twice "letter size" (international standard size A3).

⁴⁴ The drawings should not be given out all at once.

⁴⁵ Maimonides: *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, positive commandment #5, basing himself on the comment to Deuteronomy 11:13 found at Sifrei Deuteronomy, *Eikev* 5.

⁴⁶ In light of this equivalence between prayer and Torah study, one must clarify the sages' distinction between prayer as *hayyei sha'ah*, focusing on life of the moment, in contrast to Torah study, which is *hayyei olam*, focusing on eternal life. See Rabbi Kook in *Ein Ayah*, Berakhot 7:35.

⁴⁷ I believe this parallel between Torah study and prayer is well known. Less well known is the following parallel. While most *mitzvot* apply to individuals, there are at least several that are the responsibility of the entire Jewish people as a whole national unit, although the actual fulfillment of the *mitzvah* devolves on individuals. Thus, for example, the commandment to circumcise all males on the eighth day of life seems to be the responsibility of the entire Jewish people (see Maimonides' Introduction to *Hilkhot Milah*). The first individual responsible for that is the father, but if he does not fulfill his responsibility, then it reverts to the *bet din*, as representatives of all of Israel. If they do not fulfill the responsibility, then the man must see to it himself when he reaches maturity; he alone will suffer the sanction for violating this *mitzvah* if it remains unfulfilled. Another example is the *mitzvah* of settling the land of Israel (for those who count this as a *mitzvah*), which requires the people of Israel to acquire and maintain sovereignty in the land of Israel, but which individuals fulfill by living in Israel in such a way as to strengthen Jewish sovereignty there. (There has been much speculation as to why Maimonides did not count this as a *mitzvah*; perhaps its application to individuals' behavior did not appear to Maimonides as sufficiently well defined to justify counting it.) Perhaps both Torah study and prayer are commandments that are at least partially of this type. Thus all the requests in our formal prayers are formulated in the plural, and, more fundamentally, the formulation of standardized prayer texts may be seen as a means for the entire Jewish people to fulfill their national responsibility to serve God in this way together, as one people—even as individuals pray both for their own needs and the nation's needs. Torah, as well, was given to the Israelites at Sinai in unison, as a whole "corporate" entity, and not only to a large group of individuals. Thus, too, we can understand why, when a father is better at Torah study than his son, then the father should devote himself fully to that study while the son supports the family (see B. Kiddushin 29b)—for in this way the total sum of the Jewish people's Torah study will be maximized, Torah study being a way for the entire nation to serve God.

⁴⁸ On Jacob's way back to the land of Canaan with his family, the night before his reunion with his brother Esau he was left alone overnight, at which time he was injured in a struggle with an unidentified man/angel. Jacob's descendants undertook not to eat the corresponding sinew in a kosher domestic animal, the *gid ha-nasheh* (generally identified as the sciatic nerve; see Genesis 32:33). The commentator Hizkuni suggested that this was to be an eternal reminder never to do what the children of Jacob had done: leaving their father alone and exposed to danger. Of course, this is not the only meaning of the *mitzvah* of *gid ha-nasheh*.

⁴⁹ The *mitzvot* on this "Tree of Jewish Life" were selected in the spirit of Maimonides' selection, in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, of sixty commandments (out of

a total of 613 *mitzvot* in the Torah) that shaped the life of a regular householder living in his day. That was fewer than 10% of all of the *mitzvot*! Similarly, we have selected for our tree the principal areas of Jewish life (including laws of rabbinic origin and customs) that are generally considered relevant today. This reflects the continuing tragedy of our people, for our Temple still lies in ruin, the majority of our people are in exile, intermarriage and assimilation are creating a tragic loss to us of millions of our people, and the revival of our national life in the State of Israel is based on a combination of Turkish Mandatory law, British Commonwealth law, American law, and Israeli secular law, with only a minute amount of Jewish law. As we rejoice in the blessings God has showered on our people in the past two generations, and thank God for them, we know that this is only the beginning, and that we have an unknown distance yet to go before our Torah way of life is fully restored. Thus the picture presented by “The Tree of Jewish Life” may be accurate in terms of Jewish life today, but it is woefully lacking as a presentation of Jewish life of *mitzvot* as we pray it will be in our future.