

## The Jewish Understanding of Holiness

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

*This essay is from the forthcoming book, "The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d Issues and Rituals." This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).*

Achieving holiness is a goal of almost every major religion, but the definition of holiness differs from religion to religion. In Judaism, there are numerous definitions of holiness. Unlike most religions that demand holiness only from its leaders, Judaism demands holiness from each and every person. One of the goals of Judaism is to have an entire nation of holy people,<sup>1</sup> as was stated by G-d immediately prior to giving the Torah. There is a specific Biblical commandment for each person to be holy.<sup>2</sup> This was only one of two commandments in the entire Torah specifically given to the entire people gathered. But how is this achieved? What is Jewish holiness? And, can this be attained in the twenty first century, in a modern society, if at all? If so, how?

### **HOLINESS DEPENDS ON THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF AN ACT**

One of the general aspects of Jewish holiness is that it depends not upon a specific action that is performed, but, rather, the proper time, place and purpose surrounding the action. The very same action can be holy or unholy, depending on factors of time, place and purpose. In fact, the Torah's word for prostitute<sup>3</sup> is *Kidaisha*, has precisely the same Hebrew letters and seems to be derived from the same root as *Kedusha*, the Hebrew word for holiness. Thus, the sexual act itself is neither holy nor unholy. If sex is performed with a stranger for money, it is abhorrent in Judaism and unholy. The same act with one's spouse at the correct time of the month converts a person into a partner with G-d in the creation process, the holiest act of all.

In another obvious example, a Jew who drinks wine to get high or drunk and have fun on a weeknight commits a truly unholy act. The same action on Friday evening, performed for the purpose of making the Sabbath day holy (and not merely to feel high), is called *Kiddush*, also derived from the word for holiness itself. These are but two examples of many that can be demonstrated. When Ecclesiastes wrote<sup>4</sup> that everything has its proper time, he meant precisely this. Nothing is totally forbidden in Judaism, precisely because no action in and of itself is good or bad.

Thus, every action in this world has a time and place in Judaism when it is permitted. This fact alone corroborates the postulate that it is the circumstances surrounding the act that make it good or bad, holy or unholy. The Talmud<sup>5</sup> expands on this theme when it says that for everything forbidden in Judaism, there are circumstances when they are permitted. Some of the examples cited are the taste of pork that is permitted to the Jew in the form of a Shibuta fish that is kosher and has the same pork taste. Thus, the taste itself is not forbidden. Similarly, the taste of meat and milk is not in itself forbidden, and is permitted to the Jew in the form of the udder of the cow, which tastes like milk and meat together. If prepared properly under Jewish law, the udder is kosher meat, and yet retains the taste of the milk within it. The passage continues with other examples. Though wool and linen are forbidden to be worn in the same garment, the garment of

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 19:6

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 19:2

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 23:18

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:1

<sup>5</sup> Chullin 109b

the High Priest in the Temple contained wool and linen together. Even adultery is permitted in Judaism, in the proper circumstances. Normally, a man and his sister-in-law are prohibited from cohabiting according to Jewish law. However, if a husband dies childless, it is a Biblical mitzvah for the brother of the deceased husband to marry the widow, in order to carry on the name of the deceased husband/brother, and not for the purpose of committing adultery. This then becomes a holy action, rather than a sin. Therefore, holiness, according to this understanding, is achieved by performing the right action at the right time for the right purpose. That makes an action holy.

### **HOLINESS AS ABSTENTION**

Another approach to holiness in Judaism is the one most people explain when asked to describe the concept. This is the view of Rashi,<sup>6</sup> who describes holiness in his commentary to the verse "Be Holy." Rashi says the commandment signifies abstaining from illicit sexual activity.

It seems from Rashi that one achieves holiness by refraining from those activities forbidden to the Jew. This is classic Christian definition of holiness as well. The more one denies the bodily pleasures, the more one becomes holy. Long before Christianity existed, this concept existed in Judaism. As noted above, the illicit sexual activity with a prostitute is associated philologically with the Hebrew term for holiness. Similarly, the Torah states that the purpose of the laws of *Kashrut* are to attain holiness (see [Chapter on "Food"](#) for a further examination of this idea). Thus, abstention from the two basic physical drives of man, sex and food, lead a person to holiness, according to this concept of holiness.

### **HOLINESS THROUGH FULFILLING BODILY DESIRES**

There is another approach to holiness that directly challenges this classical notion of holiness. To understand it, it is necessary to first understand holiness as defined in two other cultures. In the Greek culture, beauty and sanctification of the human body were the ultimate religious values in the society, not merely cultural values. Thus, holiness in that society was achieved when the body was most satisfied. Therefore, at that time, food orgies and sex orgies had as their origin and ultimate purpose as the fulfillment of the religious concept to satisfy the body in order to attain holiness. They were not merely the "fun" concepts that they are today. As the body became more and more satisfied, the ancient Greeks felt they were acting holier and holier. Christianity reacted to this concept by insisting that what separates man from beast is his soul. What makes man similar to the beast is his body. Therefore, in classic Christianity, holiness could be achieved by denying the body totally, and nourishing only the soul. This was the Christian definition for holiness, which called for the holiest Christians, such as the priest and the Pope to abstain totally from sexual activity. Monks took vows of poverty and silence, denying the body as much pleasure as possible, while concentrating only on spiritual matters.

Judaism realized that neither the Greek or Christian paths alone could achieve true holiness, as man is made up of both body and soul<sup>7</sup> and each has legitimate needs. Thus, denying the body totally was not realistic, and could not achieve true holiness. Yet man also could not deny his spiritual side at the same time, acknowledging that while he was created from the dust of the earth,<sup>8</sup> he also was created in the image of G-d.<sup>9</sup> How could both be achieved simultaneously? This approach to Jewish holiness believes that the needs of the body should be satisfied, but only for a spiritual purpose. By using the physical enjoyment

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<sup>6</sup> Rashi on Leviticus 19:2

<sup>7</sup> Beraishit Rabbah 14:3

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 2:7

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:27

of the body as a means to honor G-d, the act becomes holy.

One example, already cited, is the Shabbat Kiddush. To the non-religious world, wine is the symbol of the lack of inhibition, the lack of spirituality that brings out the animalistic side of man. Yet the body's natural desire for wine can be fulfilled by drinking wine on Friday night for the one purpose of honoring the Shabbat. If it is not for this purpose, then it is not truly Kiddush-Holiness, even if it is wine that Jews drink on Friday night. Similarly, the ingestion of nourishment is a very basic bodily process that every being in the world shares. Judaism raises the act of eating to something holy,<sup>10</sup> by selecting only those foods as permitted by G-d and by acknowledging G-d each time a food is eaten in the form of a blessing (see [Chapter on "Food"](#) for an expansion of this theme). Of all the subjects Maimonides could have selected for his Book of Holiness (one of the fourteen books of Jewish law in his Mishne Torah), he selected only two topics: the laws of permitted and forbidden sexual activity and the laws of permitted and forbidden food. Thus, Maimonides, too, is saying that one becomes holy by satisfying man's physical needs for a spiritual purpose.

Nowhere is this concept more apparent than in the Shabbat. Holiness is first mentioned in the Torah with regard to Shabbat.<sup>11</sup> Besides the Kiddush, there are specific actions which traditional Jews do to make the Sabbath holy. All of these actions have one thing in common: they are fulfillment of physical desires performed for the purpose making Shabbat holy. In addition to the wine, Jews make Shabbat holy by preparing and eating the best food of the week, and by dressing up in the finest clothes of the week. The Talmud<sup>12</sup> says that it is a mitzvah-commandment to wash one's body in preparation for Shabbat. This shows that the Shabbat is made holy through actions that satisfy bodily needs for a spiritual purpose.

In the portion of Leviticus called *Kedoshim*, named for the commandment "Be Holy" which begins the portion, the rest of the commandments which follow are, by and large, everyday activities, most of which take place in the marketplace. These include "Love your neighbor," "Do not steal," "Do not withhold gifts to the poor," etc. According to one Talmudic opinion,<sup>13</sup> a person achieves piety by learning the laws relating to the marketplace and damages. Thus, holiness, once again, seems to be achieved in the physical world, by making the physical activities spiritual, and not the other way around. This entire approach is encapsulated in one phrase from the Talmud:<sup>14</sup> "Make yourself holy through that which is permitted to you."

### **THE CLASH OF BOTH APPROACHES**

These two classical Jewish approaches, achieving holiness through abstention (Rashi) and achieving holiness by sanctifying the physical fulfillment of bodily desires (Maimonides) are both legitimate, and have been argued by Jewish law authorities throughout the ages. The controversy still continues today. Both refer to bodily desires such as sex and food, one claiming the abstention achieves the holiness and the other asserting that the fulfillment under the proper circumstances and purpose achieves the holiness.

Perhaps the classical mitzvah which typifies this clash is the two views of the Nazir, the Jew who voluntarily abstains from wine, cutting one's hair and coming in contact with the dead, beyond normal Jewish law. One Talmudic approach<sup>15</sup> is that indeed the Nazir is holy because he chose to abstain from more

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<sup>10</sup> Leviticus 11:45

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 2:3

<sup>12</sup> Shabbat 25b

<sup>13</sup> Bava Kama 30a

<sup>14</sup> Yevamot 20a

<sup>15</sup> Taanit 11a

prohibitions than everyone else. The other opinion in that passage is that the Nazir is wrong in his actions, because he chose to deny himself that which G-d permitted him. This argument about the Nazir continued into the Middle Ages. At the end of the period of abstention, usually thirty days, the Torah commands the Nazir to bring sacrifices. One of the sacrifices is a sin offering. Maimonides<sup>16</sup> uses this sin offering as proof that the Torah looks at the Nazir as a sinner, because he should not have taken the oath to begin with. Maimonides continues to rail against the entire philosophy of fasting and using other physical denials by Jews to achieve holiness, as a perversion of the intended Torah path, quoting the verse<sup>17</sup> admonishing the Jew not to be "too righteous." Nachmanides,<sup>18</sup> who believes the Nazir's act is to be praised, explains that the reason for the sin offering is because when the person stopped being a Nazir, he lowered himself from a higher status of holiness to a lower status. In fact, the Torah does call the Nazir holy.<sup>19</sup> According to Maimonides and his camp, the only reason the Torah permitted the concept of Nazir is that it recognizes that there are some misguided individuals who think that they can become holy by denying themselves more and more. Rather than letting these people "go on their own," as is often the case where individuals have improper tendencies, the Torah takes these feelings and channels them in the most acceptable and legitimate Torah structure. Thus, the lines of both sides are clearly drawn.

There are numerous Talmudic statements supporting both opinions. On the one hand, the Talmud<sup>20</sup> says that a person will have to answer in Heaven for all permitted things he could have partaken of in this world but did not. On the other hand, there is a conflicting statement<sup>21</sup> that says that anyone who denies himself the pleasure in this world will receive added spiritual pleasures in the next world and, conversely, he who partakes of physical pleasures in this world will be denied certain pleasures in the next world. Thus, the argument is still not resolved, but both approaches are authentically Jewish.

#### **THE GENERAL RULE OF HOLINESS OF NACHMANIDES**

Yet another approach is offered by Nachmanides, in defining precisely what is meant in the commandment to "be holy."<sup>22</sup> Rather than a specific action, Nachmanides writes that this commandment teaches the Jew an overall approach to life. There are numerous laws that a Jew might be able to observe meticulously within the letter of the law, and yet still act in an improper manner. This, Nachmanides calls "a disgusting person with permission of the Torah." The general commandment of "Be Holy," according to Nachmanides, commands the Jew that even when other Torah laws do not specifically prohibit a behavior, it is forbidden under this commandment if common sense says it is not in the spirit of the law. An example given is the Jew who follows all the Kosher laws strictly and pronounces a blessing over each food, but then proceeds to gorge himself in a disgusting, animalistic manner. Holiness, according to Nachmanides, forbids this practice, even though no specific law has been violated.

Thus, a person is admonished not to go just by the letter of Jewish law, but also must be cognizant of the spirit of the law as well. That is true Jewish holiness. The analogy has been made to the physical Torah itself, which is made up of the letters of the Torah written in black ink surrounded by the white parchment. The specific laws are delineated by the black ink in the words of the Torah. But the white surrounding spaces are also part of the Torah. This symbolizes the spirit of the Torah, the context in which

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<sup>16</sup> Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 3:1

<sup>17</sup> Ecclesiastes 7:16

<sup>18</sup> Nachmanides commentary on Numbers 6:14

<sup>19</sup> Numbers 6:8

<sup>20</sup> Jerusalem Talmud, Kiddushin 48b

<sup>21</sup> Avot DeRabbi Natan 28:5

<sup>22</sup> Nachmanides commentary on Leviticus 19:2

the black letters delineate the mitzvot. Thus, both a violation of the letter and the spirit of the law is a violation of the Torah and the commandment to be holy.

### **KIDDUSH HASHEM -- HOLINESS OF G-D'S NAME**

Finally, there is a special kind of holiness that Jews are commanded to fulfill: making G-d's name holy. G-d equates Jews becoming holy with His holiness, and the commandment to be holy stems from G-d's holiness. Thus, part of a Jew's holiness is attained by making G-d's name holy.<sup>23</sup> In addition, there is both a positive commandment to make G-d's name holy and a negative commandment not to desecrate G-d's name.<sup>24</sup> This is achieved in the way in which a Jew behaves on an individual basis in daily life. If, by a Jew's action, people will think better of the Jewish G-d, that is a sanctification of G-d's name, making it holy. If, however, people will think worse of the Jewish G-d because of the action of a particular individual, that person has desecrated the name and holiness of G-d. (For further development of this Mitzvah, see the chapter about "The Purpose of Life"). Thus, holiness of a person is also reflected in how people perceive G-d because of that individual.

Thus, these are five views of Jewish holiness. The importance of these concepts and the power of holiness in the world can be seen from a unique event in the Jewish calendar. There are many lands in this world, but only one, Israel, is called holy. There are many cities within this holy land but only one city, Jerusalem is called holy. There are many places in the city of Jerusalem, but only one, the Temple mount, is the holiest.

There are many peoples in the world, but only one, the Jewish people, is called holy. Within the Jewish people, the Levites are the holiest of the tribes. Within the Levites, one family, the Kohanim, the Priests, are holier still. And the holiest of the Kohanim is the High Priest, the holiest person in the world.

There are many days during the year, but the forty days from the beginning of Elul through Yom Kippur are the holiest, when prayers to G-d are more accepted by Him. Within this time period, the Ten Days of Repentance from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur are holier still. The Holiest Day of all is Yom Kippur and the holiest moment of that day occurs right after the sacrifices of atonement were brought by the High Priest, the holiest moment of the year.

There are many languages spoken in the world, but only one, Hebrew, is called the Holy Tongue. Within Hebrew, there are many words, but the holiest words are the names of G-d. Within the many names of G-d, there is only one, the name not pronounced, which is the holiest, the holiest word in the world.

When all four of these forces of holiness are unleashed together, the power is indescribable. When the holiest person, the High Priest, stands in the Temple, the holiest place, at the holiest moment on Yom Kippur and pronounces that unpronounceable name of G-d, the holiest word, all these forces of holiness combine to effect atonement for the entire Jewish people. Such is the power of holiness.

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<sup>23</sup> Leviticus 19:2 and 20:26

<sup>24</sup> Leviticus 22:32

*He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.*