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HOW DOES HOLINESS WORK?

*The heavens will always remain heavens.
But the earth we can elevate and make heavenly.*

Kotzker Rebbe¹

HOLINESS AS A MORAL IMPERATIVE

God gave us 613 commandments. These are precise activators of holiness. In addition, God created man with physical and other needs—taking care of our health or earning a living, for example. Since God created that world which demands of us these actions, it is as if God commanded us to do them.² We are doing His Will, and doing His Will generates holiness.³ We are holier because we breathe. We are holier because we eat. We are simply asked to think that all of our bodily necessities are there to serve the soul and not the other way around.⁴

If we eat food with the intention of using the strength and health it gives us to do good, then we have sanctified the food. The table we use to serve that food, or to host guests, or to beautify our lives with a flower vase on top of the table, all achieve this idea. We use our cars

1 Quoted by Menachem Posner, Chabad.org, based on *Kochav Hashachar*, by Simcha Raz.

2 *Ramchal, Derech Hashem* 1:4:7.

3 Ibid.

4 *Derech Hashem*, *ibid.*

not only to get ourselves to work so we can support our family (a huge mitzvah in itself), but to give people rides, to deliver food packages, and to drive to the synagogue to pray. We see a glorious site of nature and use that inspiration to connect to God. We can harness almost anything to serve as a means for elevation and thereby sanctify it, and by failing to do this we drag the world down with our own failure.⁵

The Sages say, “Man is destined to give accounting (to God) on everything that his eyes saw and that was permissible, and of which he did not partake.”⁶

From this, it emerges that there is no such thing as a neutral act. All of our actions—the subway ride to work, the coffee we buy along the way, our daily interactions on the job, our relationship with significant others, and how we spend our leisure-time—have the potential to be sanctified. All are agents for the achievement of perfection. Moreover, it is precisely through the physical world that such perfection is achieved. God demands that we understand the profound spiritual consequences of everything we do.⁷ Even when we don’t clearly see the impact of our actions, they ripple through the universe.

CONTROLLING THE PERMISSIBLE TO SANCTIFY IT

Not all holiness (*kedushah*) is accessible to us. The Torah therefore prohibits certain things and permits others—to guide us on a path of sanctifying that which we are able and to avoid engaging things where the holiness is so hidden that were we to engage in these things, we would only produce impurity (*tumah*).⁸ Since we cannot release the holiness embedded in these things, our engagement with them is restricted to the unholiness that remains accessible to us.

Even those things that are permissible can be degraded. If we are controlled by the food we eat, or we buy things just because of material

5 *Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 1.

6 Talmud Yerushalmi, Tractate *Kiddushin*, chap. 4.

7 *Derech Hashem* 1:4:4.

8 We will deal with this in greater depth in Chapter 7, on the positive and negative mitzvot.

urges, or exercise just so we can outdo our neighbor, we are doing the very opposite of being holy. We need to know that the world we engage in does not control us. If we wanted to, we could walk away. Then, our encounter can be with the full force of sanctity.⁹

SANCTIFYING THE WORLD THROUGH SANCTIFYING OURSELVES

What is the mechanism that allows us to make the world holy? This happens because all physical objects can ultimately be traced back to God, and hence they all have sparks of holiness.¹⁰ Engaging the physical world in a positive manner releases these sparks of holiness, strengthens them, and connects them back to God. This is known in Kabbalistic literature as “redeeming the sparks.”¹¹

Jacob taught us this principle when he forgot some small utensils and went through enormous trouble to go and get them.¹² He understood that if these had been in his possession, it must be that God had intended for him to be responsible for their spiritual elevation.¹³

Where did Jacob learn this lesson? When he was fleeing Esau, he encountered “the place”¹⁴; he literally bumped into the material world of space.¹⁵ Jacob placed the seat of his soul—his head—on a bunch of stones to sleep. Because of Jacob’s elevated level, the stones became one stone.¹⁶ Jacob raised the stones above the level of fragmentation of the individual stones to a level where things are combined into a higher unity.¹⁷

Engaging the physical world in a positive manner releases sparks of holiness, strengthens them, and connects them back to God.

9 *Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 13.

10 In Hebrew, *nitzotzot kedushah*.

11 *The Arizal*, as quoted in the *Kedushat Levi*, “Kedushah LePurim 4,” and in Rabbi Chaim Vital, *Shaar Hagilgulim* 15.

12 *Rashi*, Genesis 32:25, quoting the Talmud, Tractate *Chullin* 91.

13 Rabbi Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*.

14 Genesis 28:11: “He bumped into (i.e., encountered) the place,” as per *Netivot Shalom*, *Vayeitzei*, p. 173.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Rashi*, Genesis 28:11.

17 *Maharal, Gur Aryeh*, Genesis 28:11.

While sleeping, Jacob had his famous dream of the ladder.¹⁸ This was God's answer of how to engage the world—a ladder rooted on the ground that beckoned Jacob to rise up to the heavens.¹⁹ But Jacob was not alone. He also saw angels going up and down the ladder.²⁰ This was a message to the generations. When we go up the ladder, we take everything with us, including the angels. When we go down into impurity, we drag the entire world down.²¹ Man, the sinner, loses not only his internal world. He affects the world around him.²²

GIVING THE WORLD ITS FORM

The Genesis story reports that Adam named each one of the animals.²³ The name of something refers to the essence of its being.²⁴ Hence, in Hebrew, the word for “name”—*shem*, has the same letters as the word for “there”—*sham*; both are שם with different vowels. The name of something is its “there-ness,” its quintessential reality.

Man looked into each species on earth and understood what it was there for, what its purpose was. He gave it its name by identifying its form and hence its spiritual grandeur.²⁵ As humans, we all inherited this innate capacity—the ability to understand the essence of something and, consequently, to relate to it in a way that redeems its holiness.

Man looked into each species on earth and understood what it was there for, what its purpose was. He gave it its name—its form.

18 Genesis 28:12.

19 *Netivot Shalom*, *ibid.*

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Parashat Re'eh.*

22 Genesis 7:21, as per *Midrash Rabbah* Genesis 6:7. See also *Mimaamakim*, Genesis, pp. 46–47.

23 Genesis 2:19: “And he brought to the man to see what he would call it [each one of the animals], and whatever man called [each] living being, that was its name.”

24 *Maharal, Netzach Yisrael*, chap. 57.

25 As with everything, God began the process and man completed. Hence, Genesis 2:19 states that God's creation of the animals included the word יצר (*va'yitser*). The word *va'yitser* is related to the word *tzurah*, which means “form”; *Gur Aryeh* ad loc. God gave the animals their form. This was God's part of the process.

MAN—THE JOINER OF ALL WORLDS

We saw previously that our world is complemented by higher, parallel worlds of spirituality.²⁶ All these worlds are linked so that an effect in one of these worlds will transmit that effect to the worlds above and below it. Sometimes God begins the process—a top-down effect—and sometimes, we initiate the action—a bottom-up effect. When the latter happens, we impact the world above, which in turn transmits it to the world above that, and so on.²⁷ This means that there is no such thing as a trivial human act.

When God invited man to become His partner in completing creation,²⁸ it was not just this earthly reality that God intended. Astonishingly, God’s invitation extended to our completing the entire universe! Far from being an insignificant speck in the cosmos, man is really its primary mover and shaker.

In the creation of man, we read: “And He breathed into him the spirit of life and man became a living soul.”²⁹ But that translation is wrong, for the verse does not say *be’adam*³⁰—“and *in* man there was a living soul.” It says *ha’adam*³¹—“man became a living soul.” Man became the living soul of the world.³²

Man became the living soul not only of himself but of the entire world outside of himself.

What are we supposed to do with this enormous power? While it is worthy to connect all that we use back to God, as described above, our responsibility goes further.³³ We are expected to move the world forwards and upwards to its final *tikkun*.³⁴

26 See Chapter 10.

27 Ibid., as per Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:1 and throughout the book.

28 Ibid.

29 Genesis 2:9: “*Va’yipach be’apav nishmat chaim, va’yehi ha’adam le’nefesh chayah.*”

30 באדם.

31 האדם.

32 *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:4.

33 Ibid., chap. 12.

34 *Ramchal, Daat Tevunot* throughout the book.

THE WORLD OF ENGAGEMENT

It should be clear from the above that getting “out there” and making the world a better place is central to our ability to generate holiness.³⁵ We need to be inner-directed to our sense of self-worth and inner-work, but outer-directed to our concerns.

In one of the grand narratives of the Torah, Jacob is left alone one night and ends up fighting with an angel of evil until dawn.³⁶ The angel wounds Jacob in the thigh, but Jacob defeats it and demands a blessing.³⁷ In response, the angel changes his name from Jacob to Israel.³⁸ But unlike Abraham, whose name-change from Abram was permanent,³⁹ Jacob afterwards would be called by either name—Jacob or Israel.⁴⁰

Each one of these names reflect a different aspect of our engagement with the world. The name “Jacob” reflects his engagement with the messy world. In Hebrew, *Yaakov* comes from the word *ekev*, a heel.⁴¹ This is because Jacob was supposed to be born before Esau and was clutching his heel in an attempt to come out first.⁴² Jacob was born into adversity, clutching at heels in an attempt to stay honest and upright in a world of manipulation and falsehood.

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weekday, we engage the
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And sometimes, like the
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35 See, for example, Chapter 11, where we discuss how man is empowered and obligated to imitate God by doing actions of kindness and mercy in this world.

36 Genesis 32:25.

37 *Ibid.*, v. 26–27.

38 *Ibid.*, v. 29. The angel was predicting the additional name that God would give to Jacob in Genesis 35:10.

39 Genesis 17: 5

40 Talmud, Tractate *Berachot* 13b. In Genesis 36, the Torah itself calls Yaakov by that name after God called him Yisrael.

41 Genesis 27:36.

42 Hence, there is a verb form of “heel,” which means “to fool.” Jacob says of Esau, “He [lit.] heeled me twice,” which means that he outwitted him twice, as *Rashi* translates it. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan translates, “He went behind my back twice.”

But Jacob is also now Israel. *Yisrael* comes from the words “*yashar E-l*—straight with God.” Jacob’s legacy to us is that we need both approaches to holiness. Sometimes, like the weekday, we engage the world by plunging into its details and sanctifying them; we are Jacob. And sometimes, like the Shabbat, we take a step back to get the big picture; we are Israel.

The mission of the Jew is not an easy one. To be Jewish is to take responsibility. It is to engage. It is to make a difference—however small—so that we edge forwards toward final redemption.