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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HOLY?

Be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Exodus (19:6)

THE SWEEPING BREADTH OF HOLINESS

Leviticus 19 is one of those chapters that totally changes our perspective on how to live our lives. Moses gathers the entire nation together,¹ and he transmits God’s instruction: “Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”²

Before the Jews could receive the Torah at Sinai, they made a covenant with God. God says to the Jews, “Be a kingdom of priests (*mamlechet kohanim*) and a holy nation (*goy kadosh*).”³ This, then, is who we are—or try to be. We are not trying to be the most brilliant, get the most Nobel prizes, or be the wealthiest. To be a Jew is to try to be holy.

The command to be holy is not counted as one of the 613 commandments. This is because it is not limited to one act.⁴ It is a facet of all

1 Leviticus 19:1.

2 Ibid., v. 2.

3 Exodus 19:6.

4 This is in line with the fourth principle in the introduction of Maimonides to his *Book of*

of the other commandments. But it goes further. It spreads its canopy over all of Judaism. The potential for holiness and sanctity are inseparably woven into the fabric of ordinary, human existence.⁵ To be holy is an attitude—an approach to life. It should permeate our very being.⁶

With this mitzvah, the scope of our responsibility to ourselves and to the world is dramatically widened. We are exhorted to discover holiness where none is obvious and where we are not clearly directed by halachah. We have to regard nothing as trivial—nothing as incapable of being infused with holiness.⁷ The Jew sees everything as having “sanctity potential”—every smile, every thought, every morsel of food, every gesture honoring our fellow man.

Following the command to be holy, the Torah proceeds to give us specific examples: We are enjoined to keep the Shabbat⁸ and to revere God’s sanctuary.⁹ We are ordered to remain strictly monotheistic and not to abuse God’s name.¹⁰ This makes sense. We cannot be holy if we don’t relate properly to our God.

But the rest of the list is full of surprises. The laws of holiness span the full gamut regulating our relationships with our fellow man, with the environment, and with ourselves.

*One cannot
be truly good
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also holy.*

It is here—and not within the Ten Commandments—that we are commanded to “love your neighbor like yourself.”¹¹ We are told to uphold the rights and dignity of others and to save their lives.¹² We are enjoined to honor our parents¹³ and to rise in front of the old and the

Commandments—that a command that has no specific expression but rather multiple expressions is not counted as one of the 613 commandments.

5 *Ramban*, Leviticus 12:2.

6 *Netivot Shalom*, Leviticus, p. 87.

7 *Ohr Gedalyahu*, Leviticus, p. 51b.

8 Leviticus 19:3, 30.

9 *Ibid.*, v. 30.

10 *Ibid.*, v. 4, 12, 26.

11 *Ibid.*, v. 18.

12 *Ibid.*, v. 16.

13 *Ibid.*, v. 3.

wise.¹⁴ We are told to treat and love the convert like one born among ourselves¹⁵ and to do no wrong to a non-Jewish stranger living in our land.¹⁶ We are told to be charitable¹⁷ and not to hate,¹⁸ slander,¹⁹ or take revenge.²⁰ Apparently, there is no holiness if we are not caring of our fellow humans.

The holy Jew is the person who pays his employees on time, does not steal, cheat, or pressure his neighbor to make a sale.²¹

While we normally associate these things with being good, we don't normally think of these things as being holy. The innovation the Torah is making here is that one cannot be truly good if one is not also holy.²²

We also have to be concerned with our fellow's spiritual wellbeing. We may not cause someone else to sin.²³ We have to engage those who have lost their sensitivity to this or that aspect of Judaism.²⁴

The message is clear. The highest of moral sensitivities to our fellow man are expressions of holiness as much as prayer or Torah study or keeping the Shabbat is.

But that is not all. The list continues.

It extends to sensitivity to the environment: not to cross-breed different species;²⁵ not to mix flax and linen in clothing;²⁶ and not to sow our fields with mixed seed.²⁷ All of these tell us to respect the order of the universe and not to destroy the world we live in.²⁸ Maintaining the environment is a holy mission.

14 Ibid., v. 32.

15 Ibid., v. 34.

16 Ibid., v. 33.

17 E.g., to leave the corner of our fields and leftover grapes for the poor; *ibid.*, v. 9–10.

18 *Ibid.*, v. 17.

19 *Ibid.*, v. 16.

20 *Ibid.*, v. 18.

21 *Ibid.*, v. 11, 13.

22 *Netivot Shalom*, Leviticus, p. 84.

23 “Don't put a stumbling block before the blind”; Leviticus 19:14.

24 Leviticus 19:17.

25 *Ibid.*, v. 19.

26 *Ibid.*

27 *Ibid.*

28 Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch *ad loc.*; *Horeb*.

The command to be holy appears three times.²⁹ This is to include the sanctification of sexuality and the sanctification of food, i.e., our most basic urges.³⁰

We are told about forbidden sexual relations,³¹ about the impurity of non-kosher food,³² as well as the prohibition not to make any cuttings in our flesh out of excessive mourning for the dead.³³ These are types of holiness that come through separation from impurity.³⁴

Seeing the list, we see the potential for holiness everywhere. To adapt the Kotzker Rebbe's question: "Where is holiness? Wherever it is allowed in."³⁵

A NEW PARADIGM OF HOLINESS

If we will try to define holiness as something removed from the physical and the mundane, this definition won't fit a fraction of the examples given here. We need to create a totally new paradigm of holiness.

If we look at this list, we will see that there are two levels of holiness. The first level is *taharah*—purity. It is a state of spiritual and moral fitness and life.³⁶ In this sense, the word *kedushah* (holiness) means to be set aside and be dedicated to something.³⁷ The loss of that state is *tumah*—impurity; it is that which debases and degrades.³⁸ *Tumah* can only come about when there was a potential for holiness to begin with.³⁹

We become impure when we breach the boundaries of the ethical and the spiritual. The laws not

Our stereotypical definitions of holiness don't work. We need a totally new paradigm.

29 Leviticus 19:1; 21:26; 22:22.

30 Rabbeinu Bachya, Leviticus 19:2; *Netivot Shalom*, Leviticus, pp. 83–84.

31 Leviticus 19:29; 20:10–21.

32 Ibid. 20:26.

33 Ibid. 19:28.

34 *Rashi*, Leviticus 19:2.

35 The Kotzker Rebbe asked, "Where is God?"

36 Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Likutei Maamarim* (at the end of *Divrei Sofrim*), p. 228.

37 *Tosafot*, Talmud, Tractate *Kiddushin* 2a.

38 Vilna Gaon, *Tikkunei Zohar* 41a.

39 Ibid. §71.

to hate, take revenge, damage property, and slander⁴⁰ fit into this. So do the laws of eating unkosher food⁴¹ and adulterous relationships.⁴² They are all expressed as don'ts—laws of abstinence—to avoid defiling our world. “And do not make the earth impure.”⁴³ *Tumah* literally means a blockage, a type of spiritual contraction. It is related to *timtum ha'lev*, which means a blocked heart—blocked from purity or clarity, a contraction of the soul.⁴⁴

The second, higher level of holiness is *kedushah*, the active creation of holiness in the world. Included in this is to keep the Shabbat, to love our neighbors and save their lives, to honor our parents and to rise in front of the old and the wise, to treat and love the convert, to give charity, and to pay wages on time.

THERE IS NO MUNDANE

What we will see in the unfolding narrative of the following chapters is that holiness extends its mandate to all areas of our life. For Judaism, nothing is just mundane. The food we eat, the love we create, the homes we set up, and our professional lives—they all have the potential to be infused with purity and holiness.⁴⁵

The paradigm of this is the Shabbat, on which we do seemingly very physical things. We eat, sleep, and dress at a higher level than the weekday, and yet the holiness of the day elevates and spiritualizes all these activities.⁴⁶ Such a person is like a Tabernacle, and any food he eats is

40 Slandering (*lashon hara*) leads to a form of impurity called *tzaraat*.

41 See, for example, Leviticus 11, where verses 4–8 all end with the words, “It is impure to you.” Verses 44–47 end with the general idea, “and you should not impurify your souls...and you should be holy, for I am holy, to discriminate between the impure and the pure, between the animal that is eaten and that which is not.”

42 Leviticus 18:25–30.

43 *Meshech Chochmah*, Genesis 18:27.

44 Leviticus 11:13; see also *Targum Onkelos*, 14:15.

45 *Ramchal, Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 26.

46 *Netivot Shalom*, Leviticus, pp. 84–85.

like a sacrifice brought on an altar.⁴⁷ But even during the week, we can take each meal and turn it into a holy act.⁴⁸

God gives a reason for His demand that we be holy—“for I am holy,”⁴⁹ and you are made in My image. Therefore, the way that My holiness is reflected in this world is through you.⁵⁰ More than that, God says that He will actively help us.

The verse says, “Be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy.” God assures us that He has given us the power to reach into the physical world and raise it up.⁵¹ If we will take the first steps, He will do the rest.⁵² God shadows us,⁵³ waiting for us to initiate so that He can respond.⁵⁴

47 *Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 26.

48 *Ohr Gedalyahu*, p. 55.

49 Leviticus 19:2.

50 *Ohr Hachaim*, *ibid.*

51 *Sefat Emet*, Leviticus, 5631; *Ohr Gedalyahu*, Leviticus, p. 53.

52 *Mesilat Yesharim*, chap. 26; Rabbi Tzadok HaKohen, *Resisei Laylah* 42.

53 Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin, *Nefesh Hachaim* 1:1.

54 *Daat Tevunot* calls this הנהגת המשפט.