

Following the Path To The Holy From The Profane

Rabbi Amy Joy Small, Ohavi Zedek Synagogue

April 23, 2017 Parashat Shemini, Leviticus 9-11

Song: Holy, Holy, Holy!

Isaiah 6:3 “And one would call to the other, “**Holy, holy, holy!** The LORD of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth!”

Close your eyes as we sing. Imagine a place, a time, an experience that fills you with awe and wonder. Take in the sights, sounds, smells -- the entire feeling of the experience.

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty!

Now as we open our eyes, let's reflect on the experience. What did you notice and what did you feel?

It is not easy to define holiness. But somehow, we know how it feels. It is a state of mind, a way of being, spiritual plane. It can be created in a religious place, or can happen to us when we least expect it. Or perhaps when we do expect it, but can't know it until we experience it. For example, a richly colored, exquisite sunrise or sunset, experienced in the quiet of dawn or dusk, or the birth of a baby, or in an embrace of caring between a compassionate person and one who is weak or ill.

Holiness is a time and place apart from all that is ordinary.

The Torah reading from this Shabbat on the Jewish calendar, called *Shemini*, includes one of many references in the Torah to the spiritual task of separating, distinguishing between the sacred and the profane:

Leviticus 9:8: “*And the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: (9) Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. **This is a law for all time throughout the ages, (10) for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean; (11) and you must teach the Israelites all the laws which the LORD has imparted to them through Moses**”....*

Leviticus 11:45-47 “*(45) **For I the LORD am He who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God: you shall be holy, for I am holy.** (46) These are the instructions concerning animals, birds, all living creatures that move in water, and all creatures that swarm on earth, (47) for distinguishing between the unclean and the clean, between the living things that may be eaten and the living things that may not be eaten.*”

The Torah goes on to list the animals, birds, fish, and creatures that are forbidden for us to eat. These laws of *kashrut* -- kosher laws -- serve to teach us discipline that we may distinguish the sacred from the profane.

To be holy is to be one with God. It is to rise above the dirt and dust, the pain and the noise of life to animate the spark of God that is in each of our souls. For this we were created.

Poem by AJ Heschel, "I and You"¹

*Transmissions flow from your heart to Mine,
Trading, twining My pain with yours.
Am I not--you? Are you not--I?*

*My nerves are clustered with yours.
Your dreams have met with mine.
Are we not one in the bodies of millions?*

*Often I glimpse Myself in everyone's form,
hear My own speech--a distant, quiet voice--in people's
weeping,
as if under millions of masks my face would lie hidden.*

*I live in Me and in you.
Through your lips goes a word Me to Me,
From your eyes drips a tear--its source in Me.*

*When a need pains You, alarm me!
When You miss a human being
tear open my door!
You live in Yourself, You live in me.*

To be holy is to be pure of heart and mind. While we may encounter holiness in a moment, while it may surprise us when we are suddenly filled

¹ "I and You", Abraham Joshua Heschel, in *The Ineffable Name of God*". Continuum. New York. 2004

with awe, pure, light-filled holiness requires separation from that which is ordinary. Moses, fleeing the opulence of the Egyptian palace, the abject cruelty that came from Pharaoh, and the dire circumstances of the Hebrew slaves -- his people -- separated himself in the vastness of wilderness. It was there that he could meet God in the holiest of encounters at the burning bush.

“And God said, “Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.” (Exodus 3:5)

Why was he commanded to remove his shoes? This was his “I-Thou” moment, to quote Martin Buber. He would rise above his base humanity by removing his shoes, segregating his physical self of personhood -- one who wears shoes. Then it was just Moses and God.

We can experience the power of Holiness when we succeed in separating the sacred from the profane. The Divine presence in that sacred moment at the burning bush was not for Moses alone -- it was for all of us. Following Moses’ peak experience, the Torah offers God’s instructions for how we were to be a holy people, so that we too could know God’s holiness and live with it in our hearts.

This is what the Torah offers in Leviticus 9-11, what we call *Parashat Shemini*. The path of righteousness is paved in the aura of holiness.

“(9)This is a law for all time throughout the ages, (10)for you must distinguish between the sacred and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean.” Torah teaches us how to makes

those distinctions and how to separate the unclean from the clean -- the pure from the impure, the godly from the ungodly.

The greatest rabbinic teacher in the Jewish history was Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, known by his *nickname*, Rashi. Rashi lived in 11th century France, and while he was a prolific writer, teacher and interpreter of Torah, he spent his daytimes working for his livelihood. He was a vintner.

Commenting on Leviticus 10:10, Rashi wrote,

וּלְהַבְדִּיל: “and to distinguish [between the holy and the unholy]” That is, to observe this law in order that you may be able to distinguish between a holy (valid) sacrificial act and one which has become profane (invalid). Thus you may learn that... If one performed a sacrificial rite in a state of intoxication his ministry was invalid (*Sifra, Shemini, 1:8; Zevachim 17b*).”

Rashi made kosher wine -- he knew the dangers of the drink. Rashi explained -- the Torah’s call for the distinction between the sacred and the profane teaches us that we must be clear of mind and heart, pure and intentional. Then you will be ready to commune with God. Then you will know holiness. Then you will live by its call. And this call is the central teaching of Torah.

This call is articulated in Leviticus 19, “*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God, am holy.*”

“Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Varka commented, “If the intention of this verse is for one to reach the level of holiness of the angels, this is not attainable. What is being commanded here is to be holy on the step (of life) in which each individual is standing. In whatever

situation one finds themselves, become holy and try to become just a little bit better.”

The Torah does not ask us to be perfect. Our sages understood, as God understands, that we are flawed by nature; we make mistakes -- all the time. The call to be holy is a constant reminder to strive to do our best; to be driven to be our *best selves*, day by day.

To be holy is to separate oneself from that which is driven by our egos and our basest desires. It is to strive to be the best version of ourselves by making compassion a habit, by pursuing peace, *shalom -- wholeness in our world*, single-mindedly. This is what it means to be holy.

The *mishkan/tabernacle* was the ancient tent of worship in the wilderness that preceded the Temple that Solomon people built in Jerusalem. We learn in Leviticus 9-11 that the *mishkan* was to be the link between us and God. It replaces the burning bush, and updates that singular experience to make it accessible to all of us. It enabled the creation of sacred worship that facilitates the distinction between the sacred and the profane.

Rashi (on 11:44) “ והייתם קדשים AND You WILL BE HOLY, because I will then treat you as holy, above and in the world-to-come (Yoma 39a)” – the link between this world and Heaven, between the holy realms and our world.”

We bring a foretaste of heaven to earth when we animate the link between heaven and earth, between humanity and God.

What does it mean to distinguish between the sacred and profane? What is sacred?

It is a way of being that carries the burning bush in our hearts, etched onto our souls. It echoes the vision of Isaiah, hearing voices of the angels singing to God, Holy, Holy, Holy! -- reverberating in our consciousness. And when we cease to hear it, when we lose the connection, we have the opportunity to recover it through sacred moments in sacred places and in worship. We are constantly offered the opportunity to come back in touch with godliness.

A poem:

The Divine in You²

To be created in the image of God is
To come into this world with
A spiritual center
That is an avenue for Divine wisdom.
To find this center, listen to the silence.
Remember
To imagine, to dream, to envision
To create.

Recognize this internal beauty
As the holy within your being.
Act as if you are

² "The Divine in You", Karyn Kedar, God Whispers, stories of the soul, lessons of the heart. Jewish Lights Publishing, Woodstock, VT. 1999.

Worthy of Divine command.

To be created in the image of God

Is to be granted a gift.

Why go to the trouble -- the discipline, the constant call to distinguish the sacred from the profane? The biblical call is not just a command or a requirement -- it is an opportunity. To experience the sacred, to know holiness, is beautiful. To hold distinction and separation from the ordinary is to be elevated, to transcend the sufferings and the cruelties of mundane existence. It is to walk on life's path of goodness and godliness with a pure heart. This is a gift. It is ours.

Song: Holy, Holy, Holy!