

The Wexner Foundation Electronic Beit Midrash Parashiot Acharei Mot-Kedoshim

Reclaiming Holiness

By Rabbi Robert Klapper

Can sex be wrong if no one gets physically or emotionally harmed? I have asked this question to many Jewish college and high school students over the past decade, and they have almost uniformly answered no. This concerns me not just because of its behavioral implications – young adults are not always the best judges of what harms themselves or others – but rather because it reflects a conflation of categories that closes off crucial avenues of spiritual experience and impoverishes the collective Jewish soul.

The Catholic philosopher Alasdair Macintyre, in his magnificent *After Virtue*, imagines a world in which science survives only as a mode of conversation. In this world, people use words like electron, atom, and molecule in their proper relationship to one another, but have no idea what they mean, or even that they relate to anything in the physical universe. Macintyre uses his imagined universe as a metaphor for contemporary Western society's relationship to morality, and I think it applies all the more so to holiness.

The reason that my students can't comprehend traditional attitudes about sex is that they assume that being holy is the same as being good. In other words, they cannot see the point of relationship with G-d that does not translate directly into relationship with human beings.

This orientation leaves vast swaths of Jewish tradition – most strikingly the Temple ritual, which occupies the majority of the Book of Leviticus and an entire Order of the Mishnah and Talmud – completely meaningless to them. Students who see the ethical as the only source of value inevitably end up discarding most Jewishly particular actions. There is only so often that one can hear the unsupported claim that waving a palm branch and citron around or eating unflavored crackers “makes you a better person” without snickering.

And “they” are us; my students mirror my own alienation, as a full participant in modernity, from a conception of holiness that cannot be reduced to ethics. What I try to develop in response is an account of holiness that nonetheless resonates with at least some of our core beliefs and experiences and enables us to use the language of holiness with integrity. (Anyone interested in a more complete exposition, with specific reference to the Temple ritual, is welcome to email me at rklapper@gannacademy.org). This account emerges from a definition of holiness offered by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l in his essay “Kodesh and Chol”:

“Creativity – This is the embodiment of the ideal of holiness. Nothingness and nonbeing, absence and chaos, nurse from the unsanctified realm; complete being and developed existence feed from the domain of the holy. When a human wills to reach the status of holiness, his task is to transform into a shaper of worlds. If a human does not create and generate new things – he does not become sanctified to his G-d. The passive type, who dawdles in fulfilling the destiny of creativity, does not become holy...”

This definition seems at first glance alien to Rashi's implicit definitions in this week's Torah portion. Leviticus 19:6 and 20:7 both command us to be holy. In the former, Rashi identifies holiness with bounded sexuality; in the latter, with restraint from idolatry. But I suggest that the theme of creativity serves to connect holiness, sexuality and idolatry.

The common ground between sexuality and idolatry is the focus on the physical. Idolatry is the false or illegitimate representation of the Divine by the physical, or the false attribution of divinity to the physical. It is an attempt by the created to create the Creator. Sexuality is the imitation of the Divine through the physical, the legitimate reenactment of Creation by the created. If the summa of Creation was humanity, then sexuality, as the means by which we enact the creation of other human beings, is a critical form of *imitatio dei* (imitation of God).

But sexuality must be bounded, as it slips easily into idolatry. *Imitatio dei* is always dangerous in that it may achieve a level of verisimilitude that makes us forget that it is mere imitation, and so the legitimate

physical imitation of G-d can easily lead to the attribution of Divinity to the physical. Thus Rabbi Soloveitchik warns that “Kedushah (holiness) is not a paradise but a paradox. The dangers involved in the realm of kedushah are, by far, more hazardous than those in the secular sphere . . .”

Identifying the purpose of sexuality as *imitatio dei* of Creation, while defining creativity as “the embodiment of the ideal of holiness,” opposes the powerful modern tendency, exemplified by my students, to reduce the religious analysis of sexuality to sexual ethics, in other words to analyze sexual acts and relationships as if the only relevant religious axis is that of good and evil. The categories of holy and profane are at least as relevant, and they are incommensurate with good and evil. It follows that our religious judgment of sexual acts and relationships cannot be grounded solely on our evaluation of the quality of interpersonal relationships.

Nonetheless, monotheism compels a belief in the ultimate unity of all value, and so there must be a connection between the ethical and the holy. The medieval commentator Rabbeinu Bachyah suggests that G-d created the world to enable the expression of His “attribute” of chesed, or “desire to give”. G-d so-to-speak needed the world, needed an Other, so as to be able to give. If holiness is imitation of G-d, then the desire to be holy should be rooted in the desire to be in a giving relationship with an Other.

In other words: While something can be holy without being good, evil is too great a price to pay for holiness. But the lack of evil is not a sufficient justification for actions that diminish holiness.

My hope is that this account makes the category of holiness an accessible avenue of religious experience for moderns. And if holiness can be reclaimed, perhaps beauty and purity can be as well, and we can restore Jewish religious experience to its full glory.

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