

COVENANT & CONVERSATION
A WEEKLY READING OF THE JEWISH BIBLE
LEVITICUS: THE BOOK OF HOLINESS



Other works by the author

A Letter in the Scroll

Arguments for the Sake of Heaven

Celebrating Life

The Chief Rabbi's Haggadah

Community of Faith

Crisis and Covenant

The Dignity of Difference

Faith in the Future

From Optimism to Hope

Future Tense

The Home We Build Together

The Koren Sacks Siddur

The Koren Sacks Mahzorim

Morals and Markets

One People?

The Persistence of Faith

The Politics of Hope

Radical Then, Radical Now

To Heal a Fractured World

Tradition in an Untraditional Age

Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

COVENANT & CONVERSATION

A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible

LEVITICUS: THE BOOK OF HOLINESS

Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union

Covenant & Conversation
Leviticus: The Book of Holiness

First Edition, 2015

Maggid Books
An imprint of Koren Publishers Jerusalem Ltd.

POB 8531, New Milford, CT 06776-8531, USA
& POB 4044, Jerusalem 9104001, Israel
www.korenpub.com

© Jonathan Sacks 2015

Cover image: The Tribes of Israel Reunited
around the Ark of the Covenant in the Sinai Desert,
after the Exodus from Egypt / Bridgeman Images

The publication of this book was made possible
through the generous support of *Torah Education in Israel*.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by
any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case
of brief quotations embedded in critical articles or reviews.

ISBN 978-1-59264-022-5, *hardcover*

A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the United States

This publication was made possible with the kind support of the
Lee and Cheryl Lasher Family Foundation

Dedicated to our loving parents

Peggy and Philip Zimmerman
Doreen Casella and Howard Lasher

to our dear children

Gabrielle, David, and Jake

*and to all those who taught us Torah in thought and deed,
enriching our lives forever.*

***Conversation** and connection inspires,
but it all starts with cherishing the **Covenant**.*

With love,
Cheryl & Lee Lasher
Englewood, NJ, USA

This publication was made possible with the kind support of the
Raphael and Linda Benaroya Foundation

לעילוי נשמת

בננו יקירנו מחמוד לבנו
דוד ז"ל בן רפאל ולינדה (יפה) הי"ו
גלב"ע י"ג כסלו תשס"ח

מו"ד אבינו
יעקב בן רפאל וז'ולי ז"ל
גלב"ע י"ז אב תשס"ה

מרת אמנו
רחל בת יום טוב ורוזה ז"ל
גלב"ע כ"ו אדר תשס"ז

In loving memory of

Our beloved Son
David ben Raphael and Linda

Our beloved Father
Yaakov ben Raphael and Julie

Our beloved Mother
Rachel bat Yom Tov and Rosa

Contents

Leviticus: The Democratisation of Holiness 1

VAYIKRA

- Between Destiny and Chance 53
- The Gift of Being Able to Give 61
- Maimonides on Sacrifices 71
- What Do We Sacrifice? 79
 - Dimensions of Sin 85
 - The Sins of a Leader 91

TZAV

- Violence and the Sacred 101
 - Giving Thanks 109
- Blood, Idolatry, and War 115
- Why Civilisations Die 119
- Jeremiah on Sacrifices 123

SHEMINI

- The Eighth Day 135
- Fire: Holy and Unholy 143
- Spontaneity: Good or Bad? 149

Between Hope and Humanity	153
The Integrity of Nature	157

TAZRIA

Circumcision, Sex, and Violence	165
The Circumcision of Desire	175
The Sacrifices of Childbirth	181
Of Skin Disease, Mildew, and Evil Speech	187
The General and the Prophet	195

METZORA

The Power of Speech	201
Language and Relationship	207
The Self-Inflicted Wound	215
Is There Such a Thing as Lashon Tov?	223
The Laws of Purity	229
The Outsider	235

AḤAREI MOT

From Never Again to Ever Again	241
The Scapegoat: Shame and Guilt	247
The Scapegoat: Perversion of an Idea	253
Thinking Fast and Slow	259
Surviving Catastrophe	265
Why Judaism Needs a Land	273

KEDOSHIM

From Priest to People	283
The Priestly Moral Imagination	289

Being Holy	295
The Logic of Love	301
Do Not Take Revenge	307

EMOR

Sanctifying the Name	317
The Calendar	323
Three Versions of Shabbat	331
New Light on an Old Controversy	337
Sukkot: The Dual Festival	347
The Blasphemer	353

BEHAR

Eminent Domain	361
Evolution or Revolution?	367
The Concept of Redemption	375
The Chronological Imagination	381
Freedom and Equality	389
Minority Rights	395

BEḤUKKOTAI

The Birth of Hope	403
When Curses Are a Blessing	409
The Politics of Responsibility	417
All Israel Are Responsible for One Another	423
The Rejection of Rejection	429

About the Author	435
------------------	-----

Leviticus: The Democratisation of Holiness

God's Call

Of all the Mosaic books, *Vayikra*, Leviticus, is the one most out of step with contemporary culture. Many find it difficult to relate to its concerns. It opens with an account of sacrifices, something we have not experienced for close to two millennia. Its preoccupation with ritual purity and defilement seems to come from another age, and with the exception of the menstrual cycle, has little contemporary application. The long account of *tzaraat*, usually translated as leprosy, is a good example of the difficulties the text poses. Are we talking about a disease, a defilement, or a punishment, and how, in any case, is it relevant to a spiritual life and our relationship with God?

Little happens in Leviticus. There is not much narrative and the little that does exist is troubling. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, die on the day of the consecration of the Tabernacle simply, it seems, because of an act of misplaced enthusiasm. Even when Leviticus speaks about ethics, it does so in a perplexing way. The great chapter 19, with its majestic summons – “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” – mixes moral imperatives with ritual and seemingly irrational commands, like the prohibition against wearing clothes of mixed wool and linen, in a way that challenges conventional ideas of logic and coherence. The

mindset of Leviticus is far removed from that of secular culture in the West in the twenty-first century.

Yet Leviticus is a – perhaps even the – key text of Judaism. It is here that we read for the first time the command to “Love your neighbour as yourself.” It is the source of the even greater moral principle, “You shall love [the stranger] as yourself, for you were strangers in Egypt.” It is Leviticus that forbids us to take vengeance or bear a grudge, taking a stand against the psychopathology of hatred and violence. It contains one of the most remarkable of all religious ideas, that we are summoned to be holy because God is holy. Not only are we created in God’s image. We are called on to act in God’s ways.

At a more practical but no less profound level, Leviticus sets out an entire infrastructure for justice and equity in political and economic life. It is Leviticus that sets out the parameters for employer-employee relationships. It humanises slavery and sets in motion a process that must end in its abolition, however long it takes. It speaks about debt relief and the return of ancestral land in the Jubilee year. This is the text that inspired the modern-day programme of international debt relief known as Jubilee 2000.

When the Americans rang out the message of freedom in 1776 by sounding the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, they were expressing the mood of the verse engraved on the bell, Leviticus 25:10, in the translation of the King James Bible: “Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

Leviticus is the central book of the Pentateuch, the Torah. This makes it the most important of the five. Biblical literature often works on the principle of mirror-image symmetry (chiasmus), structured in the form of ABCBA. In any work so patterned, the climax is not at the beginning or the end but in the middle. At the centre of the five Mosaic books, Leviticus is the axis on which they turn.

It is also the purest expression of one of the most important voices in the Torah, the priestly voice, the sensibility the sages call (it is their original name for the book) *Torat Kohanim*, “The Law of the Priests.” We hear this voice elsewhere at key points in the Torah. One is the first chapter of Genesis 1 – “In the beginning God created” – which describes creation in the language of the priest. Another is Exodus 19:6, just before

the revelation at Mount Sinai, with its mission statement of the Jewish people: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This is a priestly vocation. Despite the importance of the prophets to the religion of Israel, it is to the role of priest, not prophet, that God summoned our ancestors and summons us. The very name given by tradition to the Mosaic books – Torah – is a priestly word.

Leviticus was the book with which Jewish education traditionally began. For many centuries, as far back as Talmudic times, it was the first text Jewish children studied, their introduction to the word and will of God. “Let the pure come and study purity,” say the sages. They want this above others to be the book first engraved on Jewish minds and inscribed in Jewish hearts. Again this is odd when we consider the rabbis’ view of their own provenance, the opening line of Mishna Avot: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets.” The rabbis see themselves as heirs not to the priests but to the prophets. In truth, they were a creative synthesis of both.

It will be my argument that you cannot understand Judaism without the priestly voice. Judaism, from the Torah onward, is a conversation scored for many voices. Why this is so I will explain below, but that it is so is undeniable. It is this internal diversity, this complex harmony and occasional discord, that gives Judaism its dynamism, its ability to defeat entropy, the rule that says that all systems lose energy over time. Among the Torah’s voices, the priestly sensibility is the dominant one, despite the fact that Moses, the dominant figure from Exodus to Deuteronomy, was not a priest.

It is this sensibility that communicated the absolute and austere monotheism that made Judaism unique in the ancient world and singular even today. It insists on the total difference between humans and God, but it also knows how to bridge it by aligning our will with His. It is the priestly voice that tells us that human beings are created in the image of God. It speaks of the integrity of difference and the importance of respecting it. It takes abstract ideals and turns them into codes of behaviour that transform lives. The book of Leviticus is a sustained meditation on what holiness is and how it can be translated into life. Indeed it is the priestly voice that identifies God with life and refuses to consecrate death.

Torat Kohanim wrestles with some of the deepest questions of religion. How, in a finite world, can we relate to an infinite God who cannot be identified with any natural phenomenon, who can neither be seen nor visually represented? At a quite different level, how can we take the fire of religious inspiration and turn it into an everlasting flame? How can we recapture “peak experiences” on a regular basis? And how can we take a way of life for the few and make it the possession of the many?

Leviticus is a precisely structured book, divided into three parts. The first is about the holy. Specifically, it is about sacrifices, and more generally, about how to come close to God in the house of God. The second part is set at the boundary between the holy and the world. It is about the things that prevent us from entering sacred space. The third is about taking the holy into the world. The book begins with an elite, the priests, sons of Aaron, a minority within a minority, one specific family within the tribe of Levi. It culminates in a call from God to the entire nation. It begins in the Sanctuary but ends in society. It democratises *kedusha*, holiness, the sign of God’s presence, so that it becomes part of the ongoing life of the people as a whole.

Historically, this was taken further still after the destruction of the Second Temple, when prayer replaced sacrifice, repentance substituted for the service of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, and Torah knowledge, originally a speciality of the priest, became a normative expectation of the people as a whole. *Torat Kohanim*, the Law of the Priests, became what Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik called *ish hahalakha*, the halakhic personality.

Because of the difficulty we have in relating to Leviticus, I have made the introduction longer than for the other volumes of this series. In the pages that follow, I explain the key concepts of the book: holiness, purity, and sacrifice. I explain the concept of a “voice” within Torah, and why there is more than one. I analyse what makes the priestly voice different from those of kings and prophets. I also explain why the priestly voice, transmuted through time, is essential to Judaism and why without it neither Jews nor Judaism would have survived.

Names matter, and I have for the most part preferred to call the book by its traditional name, *Vayikra*. Leviticus, which means “matters pertaining to the Levites,” was the Latin-equivalent translation of *Torat*

Kohanim, “the law of the priests.” But tradition eventually came to call it by its first word, *Vayikra*, meaning, “He [God] called.” Rashi explains that this is a term of endearment. Many of God’s messages in the Torah are prefaced by the words “He said” (*Vayomer*), “He spoke” (*Vayedaber*), or “He commanded” (*Vayetzav*). All three belong to the language of authority. God issues an order that we must obey. But *Vayikra*, “He called, summoned, beckoned,” is the language of invitation, friendship, love. In love God called Abraham to follow him. In love God led the way for the wandering Israelites in a pillar of cloud by day, fire by night. In love God calls the people Israel to come close to Him, to be regular visitors at His house, to share His quality of holiness, difference, apartness: to become, as it were, mediators of His presence to the world.

Vayikra is about why love needs law and law needs love. It is about the quotidian acts of devotion that bring two beings close, even when one of them is vaster than the universe and the other is a mortal of flesh and blood. It is about being human, sinning, falling short, always conscious of our fragile hold on life, yet seeking to come close to God and – what is sometimes harder – allowing Him to come close to us.

To understand *Vayikra*, though, we first have to solve a puzzle. Following clues present in the biblical text itself, we will discover, just beneath the surface of the text, an unexpected and quite moving story that emerged in the wake of one of the great crises in Jewish history. That, in the next section, is where we begin.

The Story Beneath the Story

There is an intricate literary device in the Torah, much used but rarely noticed, that I call the *concealed counter-narrative*.¹ The text reads one way on the surface but another way when listened to closely and deeply. The Torah signals this by giving us clues, discrepancies in the text, not obvious enough to be noticed at first glance but sufficient to make the thoughtful reader go back and read the text again and discover that the real story the Torah is telling us is richer and more complex than we first thought.

1. My book on this subject, not yet published, is *Making Space*.

This is true about the book of *Vayikra* as a whole. Read on the surface it is about ritual: the Sanctuary, the priesthood, sacrifices, purity, and holiness. But if we follow the clues we discover an intense drama, at once human and metaphysical, taking place beneath the surface. To uncover it we need first to find the clues. There are several and they appear only towards the end of the book. The first is the opening verse of Leviticus 25. It looks entirely innocent. It reads, “The Lord said to Moses at Mount Sinai.” This is not a sentence that shouts for attention. But on reflection it turns out to be very odd indeed.

The reason is that *the book of Vayikra does not take place at Mount Sinai*. It takes place in the wilderness of Sinai, at the foot of the mountain, not the top. The last time Mount Sinai figured in the narrative was when Moses came down carrying the second set of tablets, the sign that God had re-established His covenant with the people after the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 34). From then on, the focus is not on the mountain but in the valley below where the Israelites are constructing the Sanctuary. There is a serious discrepancy here. This passage should have been in the book of Exodus.

If we look at the substance of the chapter we discover the same thing. It is about principles of social justice: the Jubilee year, the release of debts, and the liberation of slaves. Social justice is not a subject we associate with Leviticus, which is about the relationship between humans and God. It is, though, precisely the subject we associate with the book of Exodus. The obvious place for these laws is immediately after the civil legislation contained in Exodus 21–23, which deals with justice in the relationships between humans.

Turning to the next chapter, Leviticus 26, the incongruity continues. This section is about the blessings and curses that come with the covenant: blessings if the people obey, curses if they do not. We now know, thanks to intensive study by scholars of the ancient Near East,² that the covenant the Israelites made with God at Sinai was similar in

2. George E. Mendenhall, *Law & Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: Presbyterian Board of Colportage, 1955); Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1969); Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963).

form if not in substance to the suzerainty treaties of the time – peace agreements between two states, one strong, the other weak. These covenants had a highly formalised structure: preamble, historical prologue, then the terms and conditions, first in general terms and then in specific details. Witnesses are named. Provision is made for the deposition of the treaty and for regular public readings.

An essential element of these treaties was the reward for compliance and the punishment that would follow any breach. Even if we did not know this from the historical record we would know it from the book of Deuteronomy, which is structured as a covenant on a massive scale and which, near the end, details the rewards and punishments in a passage parallel to Leviticus 26. So this chapter too should have been in the book of Exodus, just before Exodus 24 which describes the formal acceptance of the covenant by the Israelites.

Even the closing words of *Vayikra*, “These are the commands the Lord gave Moses at Mount Sinai for the Israelites,” are out of place. *Vayikra* is set not on the mountain but in the Tent of Meeting. Again these words belong at the end of the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24.

What we have, in other words, between Exodus 24 and Leviticus 25 is a massive parenthesis, some forty chapters long, by far the largest of its kind in the Hebrew Bible. This was already noticed by the classical commentators, notably Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides. It is a huge digression. What caused it?

There is only one plausible candidate: the episode of the Golden Calf. Coming so soon after the revelation at Sinai, it marks the single greatest crisis during the wilderness years. So to understand *Vayikra*, we need to go back and examine closely the story of the Golden Calf.

The story in broad outlines is straightforward. Moses ascended Mount Sinai after the great revelation in which God spoke to the entire people. He had been absent for several weeks. The people, unsure of when and if he would return, panicked. Without Moses how would they receive the will and word of God? That, according to many commentators, is what the calf was: not an idol but an oracle, a point at which divine communication was received.³

3. Such as was later achieved through the space between the cherubim in the Tabernacle.

The people turned into a mob and crowded around Aaron, the leader in Moses' absence. Unused to such pressure, Aaron made what turned out to be a disastrous decision. He asked the people to give him their gold ornaments, melted them down, and then shaped, "with an engraving tool," a calf. It was a low point in the history of Israel.

Moses was unaware of all this until God told him, "Go down. Your people is destroying itself." He immediately prayed to God to forgive the people. He then went down, saw the scene, smashed the tablets, burned the calf, mixed its ashes with water, had everyone drink it, gathered the Levites, and had them execute punishment against the main wrongdoers. Then he returned to God, asking again for forgiveness. God agreed, but only partially. The guilty would suffer but the people as a whole would survive.

Thus far, the story is clear. What happens next in Exodus 33 is not. This is one of the most obscure passages in the Torah. Its individual episodes are intelligible but the sequence of events is very hard to understand.

It begins with God saying that the people must move on and continue their journey to the Promised Land. In fact, they did so, but not until fifty chapters later, in Numbers 10. God then said that He would not be "in the midst of the people." Instead, He would send "an angel." It would be too dangerous for God to be close to the people, given their tendency to provoke Him to anger. When the people heard this, they were very distressed, despite the fact that God had already said something similar ten chapters earlier (Ex. 23:20). At that time, it occasioned no distress.

Next we read that Moses moved his tent outside the camp. There then follows a bewildering series of conversations between Moses and God. Moses urges God to reconsider His decision not to go with the people: "If Your presence does not go with us, do not let us leave this place" (Ex. 33:15). Then the subject changes to what seem to be metaphysical enquiries about the nature of God. Moses speaks about the "face," the "ways," and the "glory" of God. Then in chapter 34 comes the famous scene in which God places Moses in a crevice in a rock and passes before him, reciting the words that became known as God's Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

Much is unclear about this passage, two things in particular. What is Moses doing discussing fine points of theology when the people are facing a major crisis in their relationship with God? And why, just before this, did he move his tent *outside the camp*? This seems precisely the wrong thing to do. The entire episode of the Golden Calf happened because Moses was absent. Now was not the time to set a distance between him and the people. In addition, they had just been shocked and grieved to hear that God would no longer be in their midst. For Moses to do likewise would turn an already painful situation into a double blow. That is what I mean by a concealed counter-narrative. It is as if the text were saying: there is a deeper story beneath the surface that needs to be excavated.

What we sense is that once the immediate crisis of the Golden Calf was over, Moses turned to the fundamental problem that had given rise to it in the first place. In this encounter, Moses was praying his most audacious prayer, so audacious that the Torah gives us only fragments, glimpses, forcing us to complete the narrative ourselves. It went something like this:

“Sovereign of the universe, I have moved my tent outside the camp to signal that *it is not my distance from the people that is the problem. It is Yours*. How have the Israelites experienced You thus far? As a terrifying, overwhelming force. They have seen You bring the mightiest empire in the world to its knees. They have witnessed You turn the sea into dry land, send food from heaven and water from a rock. They know that no one can see you and live. But they also fear that no one can *hear* you and live. When You revealed Yourself to them at the mountain, they came to me and said, ‘Speak to us yourself and we will listen, but do not have God speak to us or we will die’ (Ex. 20:19). When they made the calf, wrongheaded though they were, they were seeking a way of encountering God without terror. They need You to be close.”

What Moses was exploring in his questions about the “face,” the “ways,” and the “glory” of God were the fundamental parameters of the relationship between God and humanity. The God of Abraham was transcendent. Could He also be immanent? Could He relate to humans not only from heaven or the mountain top, but down in the valley in the

midst of the camp? Can an infinite God be close to finite human beings? If not, what hope is there for humanity?

Nor was it simply distance that had become problematic. So was predictability. It was as if Moses had said, “We know that sometimes You are angry, and sometimes You are moved by compassion. There are occasions when You execute justice, others when You forgive. Precisely because You are free, we cannot predict which will prevail: punishment or forgiveness. But we are the people who have staked our entire existence on You. How can we live, not knowing when You will next be angry with us, and whether our prayers for forgiveness will succeed?”

“You, God, have been gracious to me. You asked me to lead this people and I have striven to do so. I have prayed for Your forgiveness and You have heeded my prayer. But I am mortal. You alone are eternal. What will happen in the future if the people sin and there is no Moses to pray for them? There must be some sustainable order in the life of the spirit. There must be a structure of leadership that does not depend on chance.”

If this is what happened in Exodus 33, it is one of the most decisive moments in Judaism. It is difficult at this distance of time to realise how radical a break with the civilisations of the day monotheism was. The God of Abraham differed in two ways from the religions of the ancient world. First, He is transcendent. He is beyond the universe because He created the universe. None of the gods worshipped by the ancients was remotely like this. Even Akhnaton, the pharaoh whom some – most famously Sigmund Freud – identify as the first monotheist, thought that god was the sun. The sun is within the universe, not beyond it. How do you relate to a God who is infinite and unknowable?

Second, God acted in history. That too had never been conceived before. For the ancients, the gods were in nature. They were the rain, the river, the sun, the storm. In nature, time is cyclical. Things are born, grow, reproduce, and die, but nothing really changes. Things are as they are because that is how they were and always will be. With the Exodus, God changed history. More precisely, with the Exodus, God *created* history.

These two facts – creation and history – were profoundly liberating but also deeply alienating. God had now become almost impossibly remote. How can someone within the universe even begin to understand One beyond the universe? And the idea of history as an arena of

change is also profoundly destabilising. Cyclical time is reassuring. Yes, there are floods, droughts, famines, natural disasters, but in nature, life eventually returns to normal. It was the anthropologist Mircea Eliade who drew attention to how terrifying the idea of history was at first.⁴ What was it like to be the first people to set out on a journey not knowing where it would lead?

At the deepest level, that was what the crisis of the Golden Calf was about. At that moment, Moses was the sole connection between heaven and earth. Absent him, and there was terror. Yet why did the problem surface then and not in the days of Noah or Abraham or the Israelites before now? The answer is that Judaism's fundamental solution to the distance between God and man is *language*. Words alone have the power to cross the abyss between finite humans and the infinite God. God spoke to Adam, Cain, Noah, the patriarchs and matriarchs, and to Moses.

That is a solution that worked for individuals. What happens when the Israelites become a nation? When God spoke to the nation as a whole at Sinai the people found it unbearable and they asked Moses to listen on their behalf. That was why his prolonged absence was devastating. The making of the Golden Calf was a mistake, a sin. But the crisis that led to it was real and enduring. What would become of the people in the absence of Moses or someone like him? How could a nation take the risk of depending entirely on God when God was so distant, overpowering, and unpredictable? That is when God gave the answer that led to the forty-chapter digression in the story of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

God answered Moses' request with these words: "Let them make for Me a sanctuary and I will dwell [*veshakhanti*] in their midst" (Ex. 25:8). This is the start of an entirely new relationship between God and the people. The verb "to dwell" had never before been used in relation to God. The root *sh-kh-n* means a neighbour, someone who lives next door. God was about to become not just the force that moves the stars and changes the course of history, but also one who is close, a neighbour. It was from this root that the rabbis coined their name for

4. Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Garland Science, 1985).

the divine indwelling, God's presence that was always with the Jewish people, even in exile. They called it the *Shekhina*.

This relationship between God and the people would be mediated by a new kind of religious leader, not Moses the prophet but Aaron the priest. You cannot predict the appearance of a new prophet. There never was another Moses, and after Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, prophecy ceased altogether. But the priesthood is predictable. It is dynastic, not charismatic. The priests were the male descendants of Aaron. We still have priests today. The priesthood represents continuity immune to the vicissitudes of time.

Likewise the sense of the Divine Presence: The people could not see God's "face" or understand His "ways," but they could experience His "glory." It was this phenomenon, cloud-like yet radiant, that would dwell in the Sanctuary, the symbolic home of God. There would be a series of regular encounters by bringing "sacrifices," though the Hebrew word *korban* is better translated as "coming close by bringing close." The entire system of *korbanot* and all that went with them was a response to the crisis of the distance of God. That is the story behind the story of *Vayikra*.

The long digression between Exodus 23 and Leviticus 25 is, as Nahmanides saw,⁵ entirely taken up with the consequences of the Golden Calf and the new relationship it inaugurated between God and the people. All of it – the construction of the Sanctuary, the offerings to be made there, the special demands of purity for all who entered its precincts, the holiness demanded of a people with God in its midst – is about *bringing God close*, living in the constant presence of the Divine. It is also about bringing cyclical time into Judaism, about *turning the peak experiences of history into daily routines*, the "never again" into the "ever again." This is the choreography of grace, the intricate rituals of sacred space. The King was about to invite His people to enter the palace they had just built for Him out of their gifts of love. This was something altogether new in Jewish experience.

But the risks were obvious. Introducing immanence into Judaism – a God who has a "home" on earth – carried with it the danger that it

5. Nahmanides, Commentary to Leviticus 25:1.

would bring the people close to the other religions of the ancient world. They too had temples, priests, and sacrificial orders. Besides which, how do you introduce infinity into space and eternity into time without blurring the boundaries of reality? It is like bringing particles of matter and antimatter together. If the two collide, the result is annihilation. It becomes very important to keep them apart.

Hence the unique task and mindset of the priest. His role was to protect and maintain boundaries. The fundamental act of the priest is *lehavdil*: “to distinguish, separate, know where things belong and where they don’t.” The priest knows that this is how God created the world. First, He separated domains: light and dark, upper and lower waters, sea and dry land. Only then could stars, planets, and life emerge. The priest is the guardian of order in a world in which humans are always creating chaos. Only in an ordered universe can holiness survive. Only in an ordered universe can humanity survive. That is the singular message of the priest. It is the basic principle of *Torat Kohanim*.

Leviticus is written almost entirely in the priestly voice. It uses a vocabulary we encounter only rarely in the wisdom or prophetic voices. Alongside *lehavdil*, the other key verb for the priest is *lehorot*, “to teach, instruct, deliver a judgement, make a ruling, guide.” It is from this verb that we get the noun *Torah*. The most important adjectives are *kodesh* and *hol*, holy and common, and *tahor* and *tamei*, pure and impure, that is to say, a state that allows access to the holy and one that debars it.

These are difficult terms because they belong to areas of existence that stand outside our normal categories for engaging with the world. The idea that God can enter space and time is as paradoxical as relativity, quantum physics, black holes, strange attractors, Higgs bosons, and other counterintuitive phenomena of the very large or very small. The holy is not straightforward or prosaic. Where infinity meets finitude there is danger. Safety comes in the form of law.

In biblical times, the priest was master and teacher of the law. His task was to keep the Divine Presence in the heart of the Israelite camp. The people were to remember constantly that God was in their midst. The priestly universe – Sanctuary, sacrifices, the need for purity – came into being as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf. Moses successfully persuaded God that the people needed to feel Him close, not distant.

This had less to do with God than with the Israelites. God is everywhere at every time but not always are we conscious of Him. Adam and Eve in Eden believed that they could hide. The continuing drama in the Hebrew Bible is of God's attention and human inattention. God is there but we forget that He is there. Holiness is consciousness of the *Shekhina* in the midst of life.

The creation of the priesthood is what Max Weber called "the routinisation of charisma."⁶ The priest takes the fire of God, the high drama of sacrificial love, and awe of the Divine Presence – life-changing experiences – and turns them into daily rituals so that they become not rare, exceptional events but routines that shape the character of a nation and transform individual lives. Looked at one way, the priest takes poetry and turns it into prose. Looked at from another perspective, knowing how thin is the veneer of civilisation and how dark the undercurrents of the unconscious mind, the priest takes prose and etches it with poetry. Every day is an encounter with the Divine.

To get inside the mindset of the priest we need to understand the meaning, first of the holy, then of the pure, then of the institution of sacrifice: what they meant then and what they mean now. We need also to see what is distinctive about the priestly conception of the moral life. We will then be able to understand what happened to these institutions when the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end.

Holy: The Space We Make for God

Holiness – *kedusha* – is a key concept of the book of *Vayikra*. The root *k-d-sh* appears 152 times. It appears only once in Genesis, sixteen times in the non-priestly parts of Exodus (chapters 1–24), and fifteen times in Deuteronomy. Its use is overwhelmingly concentrated in those parts of the Mosaic books that speak in the priestly voice. The priest is a holy person performing holy acts in the holy place. But what does the word mean?

At the most prosaic level, *k-d-sh* means "to dedicate, to set aside, to designate for a particular purpose." Thus, for example, a marriage is

6. Max Weber, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (London: W. Hodge, 1947).

called *kiddushin* in Hebrew, meaning that a woman has been dedicated to this particular man in an exclusive relationship. When God sanctifies the Jewish people to become “a holy nation” it has the same connotation as in marriage; that is, the people are designated by God to be exclusively His, to worship Him alone. In this sense monotheism is like monogamy, a one-to-one relationship between a people and God.

However, the term clearly means more than this. In his famous book, *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto called holiness the “*mysterium tremendans et fascinans*,” the sense at once frightening and enthralling of the great mystery of the infinite.⁷ The holy is that in the presence of which one feels awe. By contrast, Eliezer Berkovits argued that in Judaism, the holiness of God means also the closeness of God. God the infinite is also God the intimate.⁸

In an early article, “Sacred and Profane,” Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik spoke of holiness as at-homeness in space and time. The Jew who is at home in sacred space (*kedushat makom*) finds God everywhere. The one who is at home in sacred time (*kedushat zeman*) finds God in all times, in the distant past and dimly glimpsed future.⁹ For Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the holy was that dimension within which all things found their unity within the unity of God and His infinite light. The secular is the world of separation, division, and conflict. To ascend to the holy is to see each object, person, discipline, and perspective as a part of the whole, with its own integrity in the scheme of things. Therefore, all things secular can in principle be sanctified once we place them in the service of God, the unity that gives light and life to all.¹⁰

None of these, however, quite explains the precision and paradox of the concept of holiness as we find it in the Mosaic books. Our starting

7. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

8. Eliezer Berkovits, “The Concept of Holiness,” in *Essential Essays on Judaism* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2002), 247–314.

9. Joseph Epstein, ed., “Sacred and Profane,” in *Shiurei HaRav: A Conspectus of the Public Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik* (New York: Ktav, 1994), 4–34.

10. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot HaKodesh*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1985).

point must be the two focal points of holiness in the Torah. The first is Shabbat, the seventh day of creation:

Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished. And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and *made it holy*, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made. (Gen. 2:1–3)

The essence of Shabbat is that it is a day of not doing, a cessation, a stopping point, a pause, an absence of activity. In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, this is the reason given for the Israelites to do likewise: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it” (Ex. 20:8–11). Shabbat is empty time.

The second key instance of the holy is the *Mikdash*, the Tabernacle or Sanctuary. The primary nature of the *Mikdash* is that it defined a certain space. It was a structure of poles and drapes that marked out certain areas with different degrees of holiness. Although the Tabernacle had furnishings, it was a defined space that contained little, especially the Holy of Holies that contained only the Ark holding the tablets of stone, and the covering, on which were the figures of the cherubim. The Sanctuary was, predominantly, empty space.

Holiness is emptiness: empty space and empty time. What does this mean? By far the most suggestive answer is to be found in Jewish mysticism, specifically the kabbalistic doctrine associated with the school of Rabbi Yitzḥak Luria. For the mystic, the invisible is real, the visible unreal, a mere mask hiding the Divine. The rationalist sees the universe and wonders whether God really exists. The mystic sees God and wonders whether the universe really exists. How are we to reconcile the existence of an infinite, omniscient, and omnipotent God and a finite universe in which humans have physical existence and free will? Surely at every point the Infinite must crowd out the finite. How is it that the universe exists at all?

The answer given by the kabbalists is that it exists because of divine self-effacement, *tzimtzum*. God conceals Himself, as it were, to allow the emergence of a universe in the space left by His self-limitation. “Truly,” says Isaiah, “You are a God who hides Himself” (Is. 45:15). And though Jewish mysticism is almost wholly a post-biblical phenomenon, there is a basic insight here that accurately describes what is happening in the Torah’s account of creation. Human freedom especially exists because of divine self-limitation. So Adam and Eve found that they were able to sin, and Cain even to commit murder, without God stepping in to intervene. Through voluntary self-restraint, God makes space for man.

But there is a problem here, and it haunts the Bible’s narrative. What is the difference between a hidden God and no God? The very existence of the universe testifies to a concealment on the part of God. The word *olam*, “universe,” is semantically linked to *ne’elam*, “hidden.” That is the divine dilemma. If God were always visible, humans could not exist at all. “No one can see Me and live,” says God. “If we continue to hear the voice of God, we will die,” say the Israelites at Sinai. But if God is always invisible, hidden, imperceptible, then what difference does His existence make? It will always be as if He were not there.

The answer to this dilemma is holiness. Holiness represents those points in space and time where God becomes vivid, tangible, a felt presence. Holiness is a break in the self-sufficiency of the material world, where infinity enters space and eternity enters time. In relation to time, it is Shabbat. In relation to space, it is the Tabernacle. These, in the Torah, are the epicentres of the sacred.

We can now understand what makes them holy. Shabbat is the time when humans cease, for a day, to be creators and become conscious of themselves as creations. The Tabernacle is the space in which humans cease to be masters – “fill the earth and subdue it” – and become servants. Just as God had to practise self-restraint to make space for the finite, so human beings have to practise self-restraint to make space for the infinite. The holy, in short, is where human beings renounce their independence and self-sufficiency, the very things that are the mark of their humanity, and for a moment acknowledge their utter dependence on He who spoke and brought the universe into being.

The universe is the space God makes for man. The holy is the space man makes for God. The secular is the emptiness created by God to be filled by a finite universe. The holy is the emptiness in time and space vacated by humans so that it can be filled by the infinite presence of God.

In biblical Hebrew, the opposite of *kodesh*, the holy, is *ḥol*. *Ḥol* means “empty.” *Ḥillel* means “to violate, desecrate, profane.” *Ḥallal* means “hollow, a void, empty space.” It also means “dead, slain, bereft of life.” Hence the paradox: space or time that is unholy is full of finitude and therefore empty of the Divine. Space or time that is holy is empty of human devices and desires, an emptiness filled with the Divine Presence, the glory of God. We make space for God in the same way that God makes space for us, by *tzimtzum*, self-effacement, self-renunciation.

The most precious thing people can offer to God is their freedom, their will. God does not ask this of everyone, all the time, for were He to do so, He would frustrate the very purpose of the creation of humankind. Instead He asks it of some of the people, some of the time. He asks it of one people, the Israelites; one land, the land of Israel; one day, Shabbat; and one place, the Sanctuary. These constitute breaks in the fabric of finitude, windows through which an infinite light flows into the world.

That light can be dangerous. Stare too long at sunlight and you go blind. The energy pent up in the holy is like antimatter in relation to matter. Without careful guarding it is destructive, as shown by the deaths of Nadav and Avihu on the day the Tabernacle was consecrated. The holy needs to be protected, guarded, insulated, almost like nuclear energy. The priests are the guardians of the sacred, and must themselves be kept as far as possible from the ordinary, the mundane, the mortal – above all, from death.

That is the holy, the point at which humans temporarily renounce their creativity and freedom in order to allow the creativity and freedom of God to be sensed. The holy is where God’s glory casts off its cloak of concealment and becomes palpable, tangible. The priests inhabit this liminal space – this boundary between the infinite and finite, the holy and the everyday. They are to Israel what Israel is to humanity, a signal

of transcendence, representatives of God to humanity and humanity to God.

The holy, then, is a time or space that in itself testifies to the existence of something beyond itself. Shabbat points to a time beyond time: to creation. The Tabernacle points to a space beyond space. As King Solomon said at the dedication of the Temple: “But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain You. How much less this Temple I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).

The Israelites point, by their very history, to a power more than merely human:

Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? ... Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (Deut. 4:32–34)

Israel is the people that in itself testifies to something beyond itself. Otherwise, it would not have survived. It is the tiny nation that out-lived empires.

The holy is where transcendence becomes immanence, where within the universe we encounter the presence of the One beyond the universe. Holiness is the space we make for God.

Sacrifice

It follows that fundamental activity in relation to the holy is *sacrifice*, in the broadest sense. God sacrifices something of Himself to make space for us. We sacrifice something of ourselves to make space for Him.

I have argued that we can only understand *Vayikra* in terms of the spiritual crisis that led to the Golden Calf. In the absence of Moses, the people proved incapable of constituting themselves as a self-disciplined

community. They became a mob. Hence the question was not only how could God come close to the people, but also how could the people come close to God? How could they mature, grow, develop, and thus become worthy of the responsibilities of freedom?

What had infantilised the people until now was their total dependency on God. He liberated them from Egypt, led them across the sea, guided them through the desert, gave them food from heaven and water from a rock. They had received. They had not yet given back. The Jewish mystics called the manna *nahama dekisufa*, “the bread of shame,” because they had not worked for it. In Judaism, when you enjoy what you have not earned, that is a source of shame.

The one thing God had not yet done for the Israelites was *to give them the chance of giving back something to Him*. The very idea sounds absurd. How can we, God’s creations, give back to the God who made us? All we have is His. As David said when initiating the project of the Temple: “Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from You, and we have given You only what comes from Your hand” (1 Chr. 29:14).

God’s greatest gift to us is the ability to give to Him. Clearly, from a Judaic perspective, this idea is fraught with risk. The idea that God might be in need of gifts is a hair’s breadth from paganism and heresy. Yet, knowing the risk, God allowed Himself to allow the Israelites the opportunity to give something back to God.

Central to sacrifice is what Lewis Hyde in his classic study, *The Gift*,¹¹ beautifully described as “the labour of gratitude.” The construction of the Sanctuary out of the voluntary contributions of the people, together with the sacrificial order it initiated, was important because it gave the Israelites the chance to give back to God. Later, Jewish law recognised giving as an integral part of human dignity when it ruled that *even a poor person completely dependent on charity is still obliged to give charity*.¹² Giving is essential to self-respect. To be in a situation where you can only receive, not give, is to lack human dignity.

11. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006).

12. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Shekalim* 1:1; *Mishneh Torah, Matanot Anyiyim* 7:5.