

Where Does Holiness Come From? Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's Approach to *Kedushah*

Shlomo Zuckier

Congregation Rinat Yisrael

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What is Holiness?

1. ויקרא פרק י"ט פסוק ב

דבר אל כל עדת בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם קדשים תהיו כי קדוש אני יקוק אלהיכם:

2. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Trans. John W. Harvey, p. 112.

[Holiness is a] non-rational, non-sensory experience or feeling whose primary and immediate object is outside the self.

3. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (RJBS), *Halakhic Man*, Trans. Lawrence Kaplan, 1983, p. 46

Holiness, according to the outlook of Halakhah, denotes the appearance of a mysterious transcendence in the midst of our concrete world, the “descent” of God, whom no thought can grasp, onto Mount Sinai, the bending down of a hidden and concealed world and lowering it onto the face of reality.

4. RJBS, *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Mourning, Suffering and the Human Condition*, p. 143-4

The mere attributes of *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh* denote distance, separation and distinction... When we proclaim in *Kedushah*, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory,” we discover God in our ontic awareness. “Sum ergo Deus est” – since we exist, we find at the very root of our existence God, who is Being *par excellence*. Of course, God is also distant. He is holy, and yet this remoteness does not somehow negate our existential experience.

5. RJBS, *Worship of the Heart*, ed. Shalom Carmy, 2003, pp. 66-7

The beauty of God is experienced as holiness, as the *mysterium magnum*, ineffable and unattainable, awesome and holy (*nora ve-kadosh*), as something that transcends everything comprehensible and speakable, which makes one tremble and also experience bliss. Beauty and paradox merge – He is both remote and so near, awesome and lovely, fascinating and daunting, majestic and tender, comforting and frightening, familiar and alien, the beyond of creation and its very essence... The greatest vision of beauty occurs when man encounters the *Kadosh* (the Holy) who can neither be seen nor approached nor controlled and yet is experienced as the root of everything... Experiencing the infinite goodness of God as beautiful means to encounter Him, not as a mystery, defying all rules of orderliness, eluding the grasp of the necessary and lawful and harmonious... *Caritas Dei* inspires, ennobles, and befriends man. God is known to and intimate with him. There is no attempt to flee Him, since the experience is not numinous; it is not “wholly other,” to use Otto’s characterization of the numinous. Man tries to imitate God, walk in His way and participate in His *caritas*.

Who Creates Holiness? R. Soloveitchik's Primary Claim

6. RJBS, *Halakhic Man*, Trans. Lawrence Kaplan, 1983, p. 47

Holiness is created by man, by flesh and blood. Through the power of our mouths, through verbal sanctification alone, we can create holy offerings of the Temple treasury and holy offerings for the altar. The land of Israel became holy through conquest, Jerusalem and the Temple courts – through bringing two loaves of thanksgiving... It is man who sanctifies space and makes a sanctuary for his Creator.

7. RJBS, *Emergence of Ethical Man*, ed. Michael Berger, 2005, p. 150

For them [the Rishonim], the attribute of *kedushah*, holiness, ascribed to the Land of Israel is an objective metaphysical quality inherent in the land. With all my respect for the *Rishonim*, I must disagree with such an opinion. I do not believe that it is halakhically cogent. *Kedushah*, under a halakhic aspect, is man-made; more accurately, it is a historical category. A soil is sanctified by historical deeds performed by a sacred people, never by any primordial superiority. The halakhic term *kedushat ha-aretz*, the sanctity of the land, denotes the consequence of a human act, either conquest (heroic deeds) or the mere presence of the people in the land (intimacy of man and nature). *Kedushah* is identical with man's association with Mother Earth. Nothing should be attributed *a priori* to dead matter. Objective *kedushah* smacks of fetishism.

8. רש"י בראשית פרק א:א

בראשית ברא - אין המקרא הזה אומר אלא דרשני, כמו שדרשוהו רבותינו ז"ל בשביל התורה שנקראת (משלי ח כב) ראשית דרכו, ובשביל ישראל שנקראו (ירמיה ב ג) ראשית תבואתו.

9. RJBS, *And From There You Shall Seek*, Trans. Naomi Goldblum, p. 115

Man worships his Creator with his body, his eating, and his sexual activity, and this worship is preferable to worship through prayer... wherever there is a possibility of sexual activity, the Torah enjoins sanctity. Maimonides calls his complication of the laws of forbidden sexual relations and forbidden foods by the name "The Book of Holiness"... Judaism declares that man earns eternal life by transforming his purposeless, animalistic, temporal existence into the holy life of the man of God.

10. R. Aharon Lichtenstein, "Joseph Soloveitchik," *Great Jewish Thinkers of the Twentieth Century*, pp. 293-4

In Halakhah nothing is sacred but man literally makes it so... While the regimen of Halakhah provides the necessary forms, it leaves to the initiative of man's creative spirit the vital task of infusing these forms with meaningful content.

Awareness of the Divine As *Kedusha*

11. RJBS, *Family Redeemed*, eds. David Shatz and Joel Wolowelsky, 2002, p.171

We may say that the whole idea of *kedushah*, of holiness, in its application to *kedushat makom*, the sanctity of a geographic spot (*kedushat mikdash vi-Yerushalayim*, the sanctity of the Temple and Jerusalem), or to some time entity (*kedushat Shabbat ve-Yom Tov*, the sanctity of the Sabbath and Festivals), or to the personal status of some people (*kedushat kohen ve-kohen gadol*, the sanctity of the priest and High Priest) or to the act of hallowing life itself in accordance with the precept of "*Kedoshim tihyu*, you shall be holy" (Lev. 19:2) – the whole idea is nurtured by the awareness of the presence of the unseen *Shekhinah*. The departure of *Shekhinah* rescinds *kedushah*. The controversy about whether the *kedushah* of the Land of Israel is retained after the exile ("*kiddesha le-sha'ata, kiddesha le-atid la-vo*") revolves around one problem: May we say that *Shekhinah* has awaited our return to Jerusalem and Temple Mount for two millennia? Wherever the awareness of standing before God has been extinguished, *kedushah* is gone and with it *simhah*, happiness. Mourning, *avelut*, then commences. The very gist of mourning consists in the desolate feeling of absence of the *Shekhinah*.

12. RJBS, *Festival of Freedom*, eds. Joel Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler, 2006, p. 84

What is the meaning of *tzelem E-lokim*, of *kedushat Yisrael* (the sanctity of Israel), of *kavod ha-beriyot* (human dignity)? All these ideas express one notion: that a person has only one master—"the Master, God of Israel" (Ex. 34:21)—and not two. Man is subject only to God; a human being is free—and not subjected to any other person. Thus, the sanctity of the personality—which is identical to the sanctity of Israel, and is expressed in the exclusive sovereignty of the Creator – contradicts the institution of slavery. If one accepts God's commandments and attains inner sanctity, then one cannot be enslaved to another person.

Who Creates Holiness? – Complications

13. גרי"ד, "קידוש כמקדש השבת," שיעורים לזכר אבא מרי חלק ב', דף 158

אמנם דברי קידוש הנאמרים על הכוס מחדשים חלות בקדושת יום השבת. חלות הקדושה משתכללת על ידם, ושבת מתאחדת עם מועד, יום השביעי עם מקרא קודש. כנסת ישראל משתתפת עם הקב"ה בשיכלול קדושת היום כיום שבת בראשית וכיום טוב ומקרא קודש.

14. RJBS, *The Lord is Righteous in All His Ways*, ed. Jacob Schacter, p. 201

Yahadut disagrees with this. In *Yahadut*, time is something substantive. It has attributes. There is "good time," *Yom Tov*. There is something called *yom kadosh*, "holy time." Indeed, the whole concept of *kedushat ha-yom* is reflective of our approach. It indicates that there is substance to the day that can be filled with sanctity. Days and hours are endowed or saturated with holiness. The day is a substance of which I can predicate a variety of adjectival designations. The *Ba'alei ha-Kabbalah*, for example, based on the *Gemara* in *Shabbat* (119a), said that the Sabbath day is personified by the Sabbath Queen. The day is not just a number. It is a creation in and of itself.

15. RJBS, *And From There You Shall Seek*, Trans. Naomi Goldblum, p. 59

The cry of Korah and his followers, "For all the community are holy, all of them, and the Lord is in their midst, so why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" (Num. 16:3), is partly true and partly false. Its premise is true, but its conclusion is false. It is correct that the external, exoteric holiness of the community of Israel, which obligates all of us to perform the commandments, does not distinguish between great and small. However, internal, esoteric holiness is dependent on the greatness, breadth, and depth of the individual. The greater the person, the greater his holiness. Many Torah portions address the people in the second-person singular. Inner experience is singular. One person's experience differs from that of his fellow, and the difference in the experience creates a difference in the holiness of individuals.

Ramifications of R. Soloveitchik's Position

16. RJBS, *Halakhic Man*, Trans. Lawrence Kaplan, p. 41- 43

Halakhic man craves to bring down the divine presence and holiness into the midst of space and time, into the midst of the finite, earthly existence...

A religiosity that centers upon the heavenly kingdom and not upon the earthly kingdom – that can be made to reflect the heavenly kingdom – gives rise to ecclesiastical tyranny, religious aristocracies, and charismatic personalities. And there is nothing that the Halakhah loathes and despises as much as the idea of cultic mediation or the choosing of individuals, on the basis of supernatural considerations, to be intercessors for the community...

17. RJBS, *Halakhic Man*, Trans. Lawrence Kaplan, pp. 108-9

The dream of creation finds its resolution in the actualization of the principle of holiness. Creation means the realization of the ideal of holiness... If a man wishes to attain the rank of holiness, he must become a creator of worlds. If a man never creates, never brings into being anything new, anything original, then he cannot be holy unto his God... Therein is embodied the entire task of creation and the obligation to participate in the renewal of the cosmos. The most fundamental principle of all is that man must create himself. It is this idea that Judaism introduced into the world.

18. RJBS, “Sacred and Profane: *Kodesh* and *Hol* in World Perspectives,” *Gesher*, pp. 24-5

It is this same concept of contrast, of first becoming aware of the Lord “from afar” that is intrinsicated in *Teshuva* – Repentance. The traditional view is that the *Teshuva*-idea is penitence. For the Christian theologian, *Teshuva* is a transcendent act dependent upon the grace of God Who is All-Merciful and Benevolent. The erasure of man’s sins is, from the rational standpoint, incomprehensible. Only the supernatural, miraculous intercession of God on behalf of the sinner may effectuate this cleansing... But the *halachic* concept of *Teshuva* contains yet another element: *Tahara*, purification. This concept is not one that predicates the removal of sin but its exploitation. The *Tahara*-idea is, rather, to change the vectorial force of sin, its direction and destination. When the sinner of the first category attempts to forget his sin and beseeches God to erase it, the Jewish repentant strives to “remember” his sin, כי הטאתי לנגדי תמיד. He strives to convert his sin into a spiritual springboard for increased inspiration and evaluation. This act is not super-natural but psychological... Man himself may determine the vectorial character of the effect and give it direction and destination.

19. RJBS, *Festival of Freedom*, eds. Joel Wolowelsky and Reuven Ziegler, p. 85

The difference between freedom through conquest and freedom through sanctity – through escaping to Israel, through immersion with intent to convert, through the putting on of *tefillin* and the reading of the Torah – is very similar to the difference Maimonides propounded regarding the first and second sanctifications of the land of Israel. A master can reclaim a slave taken by conquest; nothing changes in his personal status, and the slave remains morally and spiritually a slave, vulgar and profane. If the master is victorious over the opponent, he reconquers the slave. Conquest is valid only as long as the conqueror is powerful, but when the former master is the stronger, the conquest is annulled. However, when the freedom of the slave stems from a transformation of personality (as in immersion with intent to convert) from the raising of the soul from profanity to sanctity, from the acceptance of the yoke of commandments, from leaving the hands of the nations and moving to the land of Israel – then his newfound status can never be annulled. “Personal sanctity cannot be annulled of itself” (*Nedarim* 29b).

The Rav’s Predecessors on Holiness

20. Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason: Out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan, p. 96

A great center of gravitation comes into the world with the words: “Ye shall be holy; for I the eternal your God am holy: (Lev. 19:2). This word “holy” has a twofold meaning: it relates holiness to God and to man. And one is to assume that only through this unified relation to God, as well as to man, can holiness be thought of as possible with regard to God himself; as on the other hand one might say that only through the coming to be of holiness in God does its relation to man simultaneously become possible... What is the difference between that which we scientifically call morality and the religious expression of holiness? The difference is to be derived from the difference of the tense and the verb in the sentence in which holiness is used with regard to God and man. With God it is being: “For I am holy.” With regard to man, however, it says: “Ye shall be holy.” Hence one may translate: “Ye shall become holy.” Holiness thus means for man a task, whereas for God it designates being.

21. משך חכמה שמות פרק לב פסוק יט

ויהי כאשר קרב אל המחנה וירא את העגל ומחולות ויחר אף משה וישלך מידו את הלוחות וישבר אותם תחת ההר. הענין, כי התורה והאמונה המה עיקרי האומה הישראלית, וכל הקדושות, ארץ ישראל וירושלים וכו' המה פרטי וסניפי התורה ונתקדשו בקדושת התורה. ולכן אין חילוק לכל עניני התורה בין במקום בין בזמן, והיא שוה בארץ ישראל ובחו"ל [לבד מצוות התלויות בארץ]. וכן הוא שוה בין לאדם הגבוה שבגבוהים - משה איש הא - לקים - להשפל שבשפלים... ועל זה צווח משה ככרוכיא: האם תדמו כי אני ענין ואיזו קדושה בלתי מצות ה', עד כי בהעדר כבודי עשיתם לכם עגל! חלילה, גם אני איש כמוכם, והתורה אינה תלויה בי... ואל תדמו כי המקדש והמשכן המה ענינים קדושים מעצמם, חלילה! השם יתברך שורה בתוך בניו, ואם "המה כאדם עברו ברית" (הושע ו, ז), הוסר מהם כל

קדושה, והמה ככלי חול 'באו פריצים ויחללוה'. וטיטוס נכנס לקודש הקדשים וזונה עמו ולא ניזוק (גיטין נו, ב), כי הוטר קדושתו...
"ויחר אף משה וישלך מידי את הלוחות", רצונו לומר כי אין שום קדושה וענין אלקי כלל בלעדי מציאות הבורא יתברך שמו. ואם הביא הלוחות, היו כמחליפים עגל בלוח ולא סרו מטעותם. אולם כאשר שבר הלוחות, ראו איך המה לא הגיעו אל מטרת האמונה ב"ה ותורתו הטהורה.

The Rav's Contemporaries on Holiness

22. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah," *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State*, p. 24

Holiness in the religious sense of this word... is nothing but halakhic observance; the specific intentional acts dedicated to the service of God... The idea of holiness as an immanent property of certain things – persons, locations, institutions, objects, or events – is a magical-mystical concept which smacks of idolatry. There is no holiness outside the sphere of divinity, which is the sphere shaped by the divine imperative, not by human values; a sphere in which human action is dedicated to service of God... "For you are a holy people" occurs in a context devoted in its entirety to halakhic practices.

23. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "The Territories," *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State*, p. 227

The land of Israel is the Holy Land and the Temple Mount is a holy place only by virtue of the Mitzvoth linked to these locations. These Mitzvoth were not associated with the land and the mountain because these are "holy." On the contrary, their "holiness" derives from the Mitzvot associated with them. The idea that a specific country or location have an intrinsic "holiness" is an indubitably idolatrous idea.

24. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, "The Reading of Shema," *Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State*, p. 46

In human reality the category of holiness cannot be applied except as indicating an activity which is directed toward "the Holy" and connoting the service of God, the performance of the Mitzvoth... Man is not intrinsically holy; his holiness is not already existing and realized in him. It is rather incumbent upon him to achieve it. But the task is eternal. It can never be fulfilled except through a never-ending effort.

25. Eliezer Berkovits, "The Concept of Holiness," *Essential Essays*, pp. 281-84

With Israel, holiness has dual significance: It is a condition and a goal. They are God's holy people, as God has sanctified them. They shall become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation unto God; they have to sanctify themselves... God sanctified the priests and Israel by choosing them and bringing them near to himself. This is passive holiness. One is actively holy by bringing about the same relationship to God by one's own effort. "Sanctify yourself," therefore, means: Seek the nearness of God, choose him, relate yourself to him, cling to him... [God's] holiness is the bond between himself and his creation. Therefore, it requires mutuality... How does man sanctify himself, how does he choose God and move close to him? In the numerous passages that enjoin Israel to become holy, the obligation is connected with listening to the voice of God and doing his will... Holiness originates not in what a man does, but in the fact that he does it in fulfilling the divine intention; that what is done is done for the sake of God. Holiness is not, for example, ethics. Holiness is a specifically religious category... Holiness is being with God by doing God's will... If he acts ethically for the sake of the good, he is an ethical man; if he does so for the sake of God, in order to do God's will, he is striving for holiness.

26. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p. 79

The physical world became divested of any inherent sanctity... To be sacred, a thing had to be consecrated by a conscious act of man. The quality of holiness is not in the grain of matter. It is a preciousness bestowed upon things by an act of consecration and persisting in relation to God.