



On the Priesthood

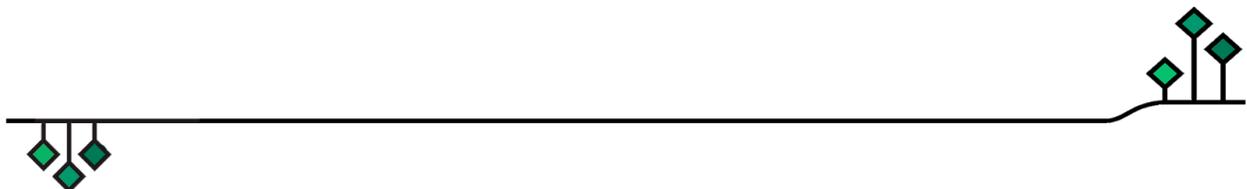
Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life

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Parashat Tetzaveh 5781

In the second of four weekly Torah portions that focus on the tabernacle and the realm of the sacred, Parashat Tetzaveh is primarily dedicated to the establishment and consecration of the priesthood, and the creation of the priestly vestments worn during the sanctuary services. To understand the nature and function of the priests, one must draw on the description of them in Parashat Emor (Leviticus 21-24). There we are told that the key concept associated with priests is **holiness**. “They shall be **holy** to their God... You shall **sanctify** him [the priest]... he shall be **holy** to you for I—the Lord who **sanctifies** you—am **holy**” (Leviticus 21:6, 8). Being holy has to do with being more like God, whose very nature is holy. What aspect of God are we to imitate to become holy? What does holiness actually mean?

The key to understanding holiness is found in the Torah’s teaching of Creation, which includes the concept of multiple levels of existence. Genesis opens with the assertion that this world is not an accident or random outcome of a blind material process. Reality is formed, and its patterns and processes are shaped, by the Creator who has certain goals and outcomes in mind. “It was not made to be void; it was created to be filled with life” (Isaiah 42:18). Humans



are called to fill Creation with life and to repair the world so it will support life to the maximum, in all its dignity and value. This mortal realm is real, not an illusion. This world is a precious creation and it is a religious calling to participate in it.

However, the material level is only the surface of reality, like the tip of an iceberg. Physical reality is floating in a sea of spiritual matter, that is, God. The Lord is invisible, immeasurable, yet is the very source of existence. This means that there are unseen depths, realms of existence, that are just as real as the physical, visible, measurable surface. The key to living properly is to participate in the physical life affirmatively and purposefully, but not to absolutize it. One should know its limits and be able to go beyond it and experience other aspects of reality.

Human beings cannot access God via physical channels. Moreover, people can live entirely on the surface, physical level and never encounter God or the spiritual depths. However, if people live that way, they are missing whole segments of reality. The Torah rejects the reductionist psychology that treats the inner life as illusory, as nothing more than epiphenomena of physical matter in motion.¹ The Torah tells us to drill down to the depth dimension of life where we encounter God—through intuition, inner experience, and relationship. Likewise, the Torah blesses and commands going inward to receive and give love and enter into relationships. These experiences are real, perhaps the most important and enriching aspects of life.

¹ See my essay on Parashat Bereishit, “Creation,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/creation>.



Holiness is arrived at when one lives life in its fullest dimensions, when one experiences the physical and the spiritual in interaction with each other. When I meet another person and interact casually, even if I treat them honestly and respectfully, I am living properly. But when I deepen the exchange into a relationship, into caring and loving the other, then I get to know them in depth as an image of God. I experience them not just as another person, but as a wondrous creature that is of infinite value, equal and unique. This is a moment of holy encounter. Then, if I go deeper, on and through and beyond meeting the other, I encounter the divine medium, the God in which the image is rooted. This too is the experience of holiness.

Leviticus (19:2) tells us that, as God is holy, so are all people to become more like God—that is, be holy. God represents life in its most intense form with all of its capabilities. God possesses consciousness—Infinite Consciousness—as well as Power in omnipotent form on the side of life. God has the capacity for Relationship, i.e. Infinite Love. God has Freedom—that is, total, uncontrolled, non-manipulatable free will. Humans are instructed to become more like God. They become more holy by developing their consciousness, by creating and applying more power for life and good, by deepening their capacity for love and relationship, by exercising free will to choose life and do good. In all these areas, living a life of Torah and *mitzvot* really means embracing the fullness of life: savoring life, loving more, and nurturing more. Living in the fullest dimensions of life is attaining holiness and holiness is found in the fullness of life.

Actions of living life deeply bring one to holiness. The Talmud (Sotah 17a) says that in a moment of committed partners making love, the Shekhinah (Divine Presence) is present and this is a holy occasion. Similarly, when guests are welcomed with friendship and treated with genuine hospitality, this is a holy moment equivalent to greeting the Shekhinah (Babylonian



Talmud Shevuot 35b). In a moment when two (or more) people come together and immerse in the meaning of a Torah text, minds and hearts are intertwined and all aspects of existence and reality are woven together—the Shekhinah is present and this is a holy moment.²

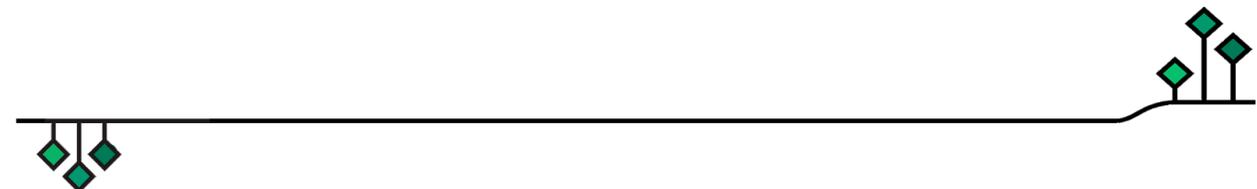
In most of life, these experiences are real but they are of fleeting duration; in much of the rest, God is present but we are oblivious. We meet the others in the present but we are engaged only at the surface level. The ideal is to treat the life before us, in all its forms, with the fullest dignity and value which it deserves. The Torah projects that in the Messianic age, where the world and society is fully repaired, people will be honored at the level of value and dignity to which—in their fully rounded existence—they are entitled. In the current world, we reach that state of holiness only occasionally, and only when we live life to its fullest depth.

Living in a state of holiness is what priesthood is about. To anticipate the future and to model how to behave to get there, a section of the population is set aside—sanctified—as priests. They live life in its fullest dimensions, i.e. in a state of holiness. The environment around the priests (the tabernacle) is structured so that there is no presence of human death is permitted. Ethical integrity and genuine affection is standard operating procedure. Here, God is manifestly present all the time.³ The priests accept the task of living in this setting and meeting its standards all the time: they accept more limitations on behavior than the average person; they strive for physical excellence and emotional and ethical perfection; they serve God all the time. They turn themselves into a conduit to lovingly⁴ channel God's

² See Mishnah Avot 3:16.

³ "Lord, who shall abide in your tent? Who will dwell in your holy mountain? One who walked uprightly, acts justly, speaks the truth in his heart. He never slanders with his tongue or does evil to his fellow..." (Psalm 15:1-3).

⁴ See the Priestly blessing in Numbers 6:22-27. It ends with the words: "To bless God's people, Israel, **with love.**"



blessings—the blessing of vitality and depth in life—to the rest of the population living in the not yet fully repaired society.

In a way, this is an artificial existence, living a filtered life in a controlled environment. Priests are able to live this way because they are relieved of the burden of making a living, or running the general policy and repairing the ordinary messes in society. Still, they function as an avant garde, living now at a depth level and at an emotional and ethical excellence that is meant to inspire all the people. The priests and the sanctuary are created to engage the rest of society to visit, view, and imitate.

That is why the Torah moves to assure that priesthood is not seen simply as a genetic hierarchy. Priests are living examples, who earn their distinction by their behaviors and role models. To allow others to join in uplifting society, the Torah provides a model of joining a kind of priesthood for a temporary period—the Nazirite.⁵

Maimonides writes that **every person in the world** (including non-Jews) who is inspired to stand before God and who gives up the preoccupations and distractions of daily life to serve God all the time, i.e. lives like a priest, a life of full-time holiness, will be “sanctified as **kodesh kodashim** (holy of holies).”⁶ I believe that this is Maimonides’ application of Isaiah’s prophecy, that in the end of days, God “will also take of others [Gentiles] to the priests and Levites” (Isaiah 66:21). At that time, every Jew will be a priest, fulfilling the divine promise of Israel becoming a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6). Then the whole earth will be like the

⁵ See Numbers 6:1-21.

⁶ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Shemittah ve-Yovel 13:13.



tabernacle (or Temple) and all will live a holy existence: life to its fullest, in ethical and physical wholeness, in a permanent state of holiness.

