



“You Are Holy”: Relationship After Disappointment

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One of the themes in Sefer Vayikra is the holiness of God. God calls Godself holy five times in the book, as in this week’s Parashat Emor: “For I, YHVH, am holy, who makes you [the priests] holy” (Leviticus 21:8).¹ In some ways, this is the opposite of our liturgical experience, where we, the worshipers, address God directly and call God holy. What does it mean to say to God as part of our daily prayer: “You are holy”?

This is prominently the theme of the third blessing of every Amidah:

You are holy

and Your name is holy

And holy ones every day praise You, Selah.

Blessed are You, YHVH, the Holy God.

אתה קדוש

ושמך קדוש

וקדושים בכל יום יהללוך סלה

ברוך אתה ה' הא-ל הקדוש

¹ God also states that God is holy in Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26.



What might we be saying when we pray to God with the words: “You are holy”? After all, God does not need us to confirm God’s status as “holy.” As noted by R. Zev Wolf Einhorn,² God says:

Maharzu to Shemot Rabbah 15:24

I don't need others to make Me holy.

מהרז"ן שמות רבה טו:כד

ואיני צריך שיקדשוני אחרים

It turns out there is only one place in all of the Bible where a person calls God holy with the language in our blessing: Psalm 22:4.³ In the context of the psalm, the act of calling God holy is not a mere exercise in description of the Divine, but rather a turning point in a difficult moment in our relationship with God. This intertext has the potential to significantly shift how we might understand this blessing in the Amidah.

Psalms 22:2-6

My God, my God,
why have You abandoned me;
why so far from delivering me
and from my anguished roaring?
My God, I cry
by day—You answer not;
by night, and have no respite.

But You are Holy,

תהלים כב:ב-ו

א-לִי א-לִי
לְמַעַן עֲזֹבְתִי
רְחוֹק מִיִּשְׁוּעָתִי
דְּבַרִי שְׁאֲגִתִּי:
אֲלֶיךָ אֶקְרָא
יוֹמָם וְלַיְלָה תַּעֲנֶה
וְלִילָה וְלֹא-דוֹמִיָּה לִי:

וְאֵתָה קְדוֹשׁ

² 19th c., Eastern Europe. R. Zev Wolf Einhorn, also known as the Maharzu, is most famous for his commentaries on the books of Midrash Rabbah.

³ Interestingly, Abudraham and R"l bar Yakar do not connect our phrase to this verse. However, one version of the blessing from the Geniza (T-S 8H14.5) explicitly quotes this verse before the final line of the blessing. See Yehezkel Luger, *Tefillat Ha-Amidah Le-Ḥol al Pi Ha-Genizah Ha-Kahirit* (Jerusalem: Orhot, 2001), p. 71. Modern scholars have pointed to this link. See Louis Ginzberg, *Perushim Ve-Ḥiddushim Be-Yerushalmi* (New York: JTS, 1961), p. 205 and Israel Davidson, *Mahzor Yannai* (New York: JTS, 1919), p. XXX, n. 57.



dwelling (in/on) the praises of Israel.
In You our ancestors trusted;
they trusted, and You rescued them.
To You they cried out and they escaped;
in You they trusted and were not disappointed.

יושב תהלות יִשְׂרָאֵל:
בְּךָ בְּטַחוּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ
בְּטַחוּ וַתִּפְלְטֵמוּ:
אֵלֶיךָ זָעָקוּ וַנִּמָּלְטוּ
בְּךָ בְּטַחוּ וְלֹא-בִּזְנוּ:

In this psalm, the speaker feels abandoned by God. He cries out: "God, why have you left me? I call to You, but You do not respond!" In my own prayer life, I have sometimes felt this way. I find myself praying to God urgently, but God is not responding. Especially when I want God to heal someone I love, or bring an end to violence after an attack, I am upset when I see no immediate response to my prayer. I can feel alone and abandoned in these moments, and they are difficult.

But the Psalmist does not remain stuck in this emotional state of utter abandonment. After giving voice to the feeling of God's distance, the Psalmist goes on to recite: "ואתה קדוש - But You are holy." This is a turning point in the religious struggle of the Psalmist. The letter *vav* here (translated as "but") signals the shift.⁴ The Psalmist moves from complaint to an attempt at connection; he addresses God with the intimate word: "You." He then notes how God **did** respond in the past to our ancestors. There is hope of connection today based on past connections in our history.

The second part of the verse serves to strengthen the relational understanding of "But you are holy."⁵ It reads:

⁴ See Amos Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Sefer Tehillim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), vol. 1, p. 115.

⁵ Some interpreters parse the line differently, dividing the phrase at *ואתה קדוש יושב*. For instance, JPS translates: "You are the Holy One, enthroned; the Praise of Israel." See also Metzudat David's explanation, who compares it to Lamentations 5:19. But others, including the Masoretic understanding (expressed through the *trop*), the King James Bible, and Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 71, divide the line as explained above. See further Amos Hakham, vol. 1, p. 115, n. 3. God is called "יושב תהלות - the One who dwells in praise"

dwelling on/in the praises of Israel

יושב תהלות ישראל

In this verse, God's holiness does not exist entirely independent of Israel's praises. While it does not completely depend on Israel, it is intimately linked to Israel. The Psalmist calls God holy, and then notes how God is found in our prayers, close to us. Ibn Ezra offers this interpretation of the above phrase: "You are found in the praises, even as You are holy."⁶ When God is called holy, we might expect that indicates God is separate and distinct, perhaps distant from humans who can't approach that level of holiness. Yet this verse offers another view of holiness: God can be separate, but also connected to us. The following *midrash* draws out this relational understanding of God's holiness:

Bereishit Rabbah 48:7, ed Theodor-Albeck, p. 482

R. Shmuel bar Hiyya, R. Yudan [said] in the name of R. Hanina: For each and every praise that Israel praises the Holy Blessed One, [God] causes the Shekhinah (God's presence) to rest on them. What is the proof? "But You are holy, who dwells on the praises of Israel" (Psalm 22:4).

בראשית רבה מח:ז (תיאודור-אלבק)

ר' שמואל בר חייא (רב) [ר'] יודן בשם ר' חנינה על כל שבח ושבח שישראל משבחים להקב"ה משרה שכינתו עליהם מה טעם ואתה קדוש יושב תהלות ישראל (תהלים כב, ד).

R. Hanina understands the praises of Israel in the verse to be the vehicle that draws God and Israel closer. Just as God is not holy in a vacuum, Israel does not praise in a vacuum. Rather, both God and Israel are drawn to dwell together thanks to the prayers that Israel recites.

in some liturgical poems. See *Mahzor Le-Yamim Ha-Nora'im: Yom Kippur*, ed. E. Daniel Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), p. 149 and 385; *Mahzor Vitry* #463, ed. Horowitz, p. 582.

⁶ These praises (תהלות) recall the word יהלילך later in the blessing. One might have expected a verb with the root קדש, and so יהלילך in the blessing seems intentionally linked to Psalm 22:4. (It also recalls Psalm 84:5, and cf. Psalm 150:1). The phrase יושב תהלות ישראל is, however, open to multiple interpretations; see, for instance, the interpretations on this verse of Rashi, Radak, and Malbim



There is a possibility of reconnection, even after distance and disappointment. In the *midrash*, Psalm 22:4 is seen as the evidence of this point of connection.⁷

Bringing this back to our prayer moment, the blessing of Attah Kadosh follows the second blessing of the Amidah, where we have just evoked God as the one who gives life to the dead, who supports the fallen, heals the sick, and frees the captives. But what if we aren't experiencing that aspect of God's power in the world? What if we are feeling neglected or even abandoned by God, following the potentially unfulfilled promises of God in the previous blessing?

This statement of "You are holy" serves as the start of a return to a relationship that still remains intact, despite the disappointment. When I as a worshiper call God holy, God is drawn closer, dwelling on my praise. Calling God holy is not an abstract description of the quality of God; rather it is a call for a renewed relationship after disappointment. The feeling of God's distance is not fatal to our ultimate connection with God. The biblical allusion in this blessing, Attah Kadosh, reminds us how to start moving back into relationship.

⁷ Psalm 22:4 itself is quoted verbatim in the series of poems that lead to the Kedushah on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. See *Mahzor Le-Yamim Ha-Noraim: Rosh Hashanah*, ed. E. Daniel Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), p. 77. See also Shulamit Elitzur, *Sod Meshalshei Kodesh: Ha-Kedushta Mei-Reishitah Ve-Ad Yemei R. Eleazar Be-Rebbe Kallir* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2019, Hebrew), p. 88 and pp. 162. It also appears in the beginning of Kedushah De-Sidra. See Leon Liebreich, "An Analysis of 'U-Ba Le-Ziyyon' in the Liturgy," *HUCA* 21 (1948), p. 205-206.

