

Parashat Acharei Mot describes the service of the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. It was a dramatic and highly charged ritual during which he cast lots on two identical goats, one of which was offered as a sacrifice while the other was sent into the wilderness to die, the so-called “scapegoat.” The entry of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies marked the spiritual high-point of the Jewish year.

The *parasha* also outlines the prohibition against eating blood, and the laws of forbidden sexual relations, both of them aspects of the life of purity God asks of the Jewish people.

The first of the following essays looks at the transformation of atonement from the pleas of Moses after the sin of the Golden Calf and the subsequent service of the High Priest. The second, third, and fourth look at different aspects of the ritual of the scapegoat. One is about the difference between the two key processes of Yom Kippur: atonement and purification. The next is about the “scapegoat” in other cultures. **It turns out to be not the same idea as in Judaism, but rather its opposite.** The fourth is about the two goats and the idea that they symbolise twins, in particular, Jacob and Esau. What is the connection between the two brothers and Yom Kippur?

The fifth essay is about the remarkable transformation of Yom Kippur after the destruction of the Second Temple and the role of R. Akiva in rescuing hope from tragedy. The last is about Nahmanides’ understanding of Vayikra 18 and the centrality of the land of Israel to the life and faith of Judaism.

With *Parashat Kedoshim*, the laws of holiness broaden out from the world of the Sanctuary and priests to that of the Israelites as a whole, commanding them to be holy because “I the Lord your God am holy.” The opening chapter contains the famous “holiness code” with its commands to love the neighbour and the stranger, as well as other laws more ritual in character. The second half of the *parasha* deals with forbidden sexual relations **and other prohibited pagan practices.**

The first essay explores the idea of the democratisation of holiness in Judaism. **Not only priests, but all members of the nation are expected to be holy.** The second analyses the connection between the apparently unrelated laws of the holiness code, showing that they represent a unique moral vision, that of priestly consciousness, which is one of three different approaches to morality in the Torah and Judaism generally.

The third essay asks what it is to “be holy,” over and above the specific demands of Jewish law. The fourth explores the centrality of love in Judaism, and the fifth looks at the prohibition against taking revenge.

*From Priest to People*¹

Something fundamental happens at the beginning of this *parasha* whose story is one of the greatest, if unacknowledged, contributions of Judaism to the world.

Until now *Vayikra* has been largely about sacrifices, purity, the Sanctuary, and the priesthood. It has been, in short, about a holy place, holy offerings, and the elite and holy people—Aaron and his descendants—who minister there. **Suddenly, in chapter 19, the text opens up to embrace the whole of the people and the Whole of life:**

The Lord said to Moses: “Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, ‘Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy. (Lev. 19:1-2)

This is the first and only time in Leviticus that so inclusive an address is commanded. The sages say that it means that the contents of the chapter were proclaimed by Moses to a formal gathering of the entire nation (*hak’hel*). **It is the people as a Whole who are commanded to “be holy,” not just an elite, the priests.** It is life itself that is to be sanctified, as the chapter goes on to make clear. Holiness is to be made manifest in the way the nation makes its clothes and plants its fields, in the way justice is administered, workers are paid, and business conducted. **The vulnerable—the deaf, the blind, the elderly, and the stranger—are to be afforded special protection.** The whole society is to be governed by love, without resentments or revenge.

1. ... the entire nation (*hak’hel*).

a. The word *hak’hel* means “gathering” or “assembly”—the word *k’hilah* (which comes from the same root), is the modern Hebrew word for “synagogue” (i.e., a “gathering” or “assembly” of the people) and, the word used in the Septuagint (LXX) to translate this Hebrew word into Greek is *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* is the word which is translated “church” in every English translation of the Greek Apostolic Writings – even though in Greek it means a “secular assembly” and is NEVER used in Greek literature of a “religious assembly.”

What we witness here, in other words, is **the radical democratisation of holiness.** All ancient societies had priests. We have encountered four instances in the Torah thus far of non-Israelite priests: Malkizedek, Abraham’s contemporary, described as a priest of God Most High; Potiphar, Joseph’s father-in-law; the Egyptian priests as a whole, whose land Joseph did not nationalise; and Yitro, Moses’ father-in-law, a Midianite priest. The priesthood was not unique to Israel, and everywhere it was an elite.

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 283-287.

Here for the first time, we find a code of holiness directed to the people as a whole. **We are all called on to be holy.**

2. 1Peter 1:13-20—From: Kefa, an emissary of Yeshua the Messiah To: God's chosen people, **living as aliens in the Diaspora** (1:1 [CJB])

¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But **just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do**; ¹⁶for it is written: "**Be holy, because I am holy**" (Lev 19:2). ¹⁷Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here (Exo 2:22) **in reverent fear.**

a. 1Thessalonians 4:7

⁷For God did not call us to be impure, **but to live a holy life.**

b. 2Corinthians 7:1

¹... **perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.**

c. Hebrews 12:14

¹⁴Make every effort to live in peace with everyone **and to be holy ...**

In a strange way, though, this comes as no surprise. The idea, if not the details, had already been hinted at. The most explicit instance comes in the prelude to the great covenant-making ceremony at Mount Sinai when God tells Moses to say to the people, "Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:5-6), that is, **a kingdom all of whose members are to be in some sense priests, and a nation that is in its entirety holy.**

3. Deuteronomy 4:5-8

⁵See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the LORD my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Observe them carefully, for **this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations**, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."

a. 1Peter 2:9

⁹But you are ... God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

b. 1Peter 2:12

¹²Live such good lives among the pagans that ... they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

c. Matthew 5:16

¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

The first intimation is much earlier still, in the first chapter of Genesis, with its monumental assertion, "'Let us make mankind in Our image, in Our likeness' ... So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them" (Gen. 1:26-27). What is revolutionary in this declaration is not that a human being could be in the image of God. That is precisely how kings of Mesopotamian city states and pharaohs of Egypt were regarded. They were seen as the representatives, the living images, of the gods. That is how they derived their authority. **The Torah's revolution is the statement that not some, but ALL HUMANS SHARE THIS DIGNITY. REGARDLESS OF CLASS, COLOUR, CULTURE, OR CREED, WE ARE ALL IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD.** Thus was born the cluster of ideas that, though they took many millennia to be realised, led to the distinctive culture of the West: the non-negotiable dignity of the human person, the idea of human rights, and eventually, the political and economic expressions of these ideas: liberal democracy on the one hand, and the free market on the other.

4. Galatians 3:6-9

⁸**Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith ...**

a. Ephesians 2:11-3:1 (CJB)

¹¹Therefore, remember your former state: you Gentiles by birth ...

¹²at that time had no Messiah. **You were estranged from the national life of Isra'el. You were foreigners to the covenants embodying God's promise.** You were in this world without hope and without God. ¹³But now, **you who were once far off have been brought near** through the shedding of the Messiah's blood.

1) ... *brought near* to what? To a "church" or to **"the national life of Israel"** (v. 12)?

¹⁴For he himself is our *shalom*—he has made us both one and **has broken down the *m'chitzah* which divided us** ¹⁵by destroying in his own body **the enmity** occasioned by the *Torah* ... He did this in order to create in union with himself from the two groups a single new humanity and thus make *shalom* ...

1) The *m'chitzah* on the Temple Mount prevented non-Jews from entering the various Temple courtyards that allowed God's people (Israel) to worship the Lord.

2) What happens when, "in the Messiah" the *m'chitzah* is removed? Believers among the Israelites become members of a "church" or Believers among the Gentiles gain access to the presence of God?

¹⁸So then, **you are no longer foreigners and strangers.** On the contrary, you are fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's family. ²⁰You have been built on **the foundation of the emis-**

saries and the prophets, with the cornerstone being Yeshua the Messiah himself. ²¹In union with him the whole building is held together ... ²²you yourselves are being built together into a spiritual dwelling-place for God!

The point is not that these ideas were fully formed in the minds of human beings during the period of biblical history. Manifestly, this is not so. The concept of human rights is a product of the seventeenth century. Democracy was not fully implemented until the twentieth. But already in Genesis 1 the seed was planted. That is what Jefferson meant in his famous words, **“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,”** and what John F. Kennedy alluded to in his Inaugural Address when he spoke of the “revolutionary belief” that **“the rights of man (i.e., all men) come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”**

The irony is that these three texts, Genesis 1, Exodus 19:6, and Leviticus 19, are all spoken in the priestly voice Judaism calls *Torat Kohanim*.⁽¹⁾ On the face of it, priests were not egalitarian. They all came from a single tribe, the Levites, and from a single family, that of Aaron, within the tribe. To be sure, the Torah tells us that this was not God’s original intention. Initially, it was to have been the firstborn—those who were saved from the last of the plagues—who were charged with special holiness as the ministers of God. It was only after the sin of the Golden Calf, in which the tribe of Levi did not participate, that the change was made. Even so, the priesthood would have been an elite, a role reserved specifically for firstborn males. So deep is the concept of equality written into monotheism that it emerges precisely from the priestly voice, from which we would least expect it.

(1) There is, of course, a prophetic call to equality also. We hear, in all the prophets a critique of the abuse of power and the exploitation of the poor and powerless. What made the priestly voice so significant is that it is the voice of law, and thus of the legal structures that alleviated poverty and set limits to slavery.

The reason is this: **religion in the ancient world was, not accidentally but essentially, a defence of hierarchy**. With the development, first of agriculture, then of cities, what emerged were highly stratified societies with a ruler on top, surrounded by a royal court, beneath which was an administrative elite, and at the bottom, an illiterate mass that was conscripted from time to time either as an army or as a *corvée*, a labour force used in the construction of monumental buildings.

5. **In Rome, the society was highly class conscious and hierarchical** ... the whole society of Rome was divided into six classes known as Patrician, Senators, Equestrians, Commons, Freedpeople and Slaves. Out of these, Patricians, Senators and Equestrians are considered as the up-

per classes, Commons were considered as the middle classes and Freedpeople and Slaves were considered as the poor lower classes.²

a. There were multiple social hierarchies present and mobility was difficult, but not impossible between classes

What kept the structure in place was an elaborate doctrine of a heavenly hierarchy whose origins were told in myth, whose most familiar natural symbol was the sun, and whose architectural representation was the pyramid or ziggurat, a massive building broad at the base and narrow at the top. The gods had fought and established an order of dominance and submission. **To rebel against the earthly hierarchy was to challenge reality itself**. This belief was universal in the ancient world. Aristotle thought that some were born to rule, others to be ruled. Plato constructed a myth in his *The Republic*, in which class divisions existed because the gods had made some people with gold, some with silver, and others with bronze. This was the “noble lie” that had to be told if a society was to protect itself against dissent from within.

Monotheism removes the entire mythological basis of hierarchy.

There is no order among the gods because there are no gods, there is only the One God, creator of all. Some form of hierarchy will always exist: armies need commanders, films need directors, and orchestras, conductors. But **these are functional, not ontological (i.e., having to do with the nature of being)**. They are not a matter of birth. So **it is all the more impressive to find the most egalitarian sentiments coming from the world of the priest, whose religious role was a matter of birth**.

The concept of equality we find in the Torah specifically and Judaism generally is not an equality of wealth: Judaism is not communism. Nor is it an equality of power: Judaism is not anarchy. **It is fundamentally an equality of dignity. We are all equal citizens in the nation whose sovereign is God**. Hence the elaborate political and economic structure set out in Leviticus, organised around the number seven, the sign of the holy. Every seventh day is free time. Every seventh year, the produce of the field belongs to all, Israelite slaves are to be liberated, and debts released. Every fiftieth year, ancestral land was to return to its original owners. Thus **the inequalities that are the inevitable result of freedom are mitigated**. **The logic of all these provisions is the priestly insight that God, creator of all, is the ultimate owner of all: “The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is Mine and you reside in My land as strangers and temporary residents” (Lev. 25:23)**. God therefore has the right, not just the power, to set limits to inequality. **No one should be robbed of dignity by total poverty, endless servitude, or unrelieved indebtedness**.

2 <https://www.hierarchystructure.com/ancient-rome-social-hierarchy/>

What is truly remarkable, however, is what happened after the biblical era and the destruction of the Second Temple. Faced with the loss of the entire infrastructure of the holy, the Temple, its priests, and sacrifices, Judaism translated the entire system of *avoda*, divine service, into the everyday life of ordinary Jews. **In prayer, every Jew became a priest offering a sacrifice. In repentance, he became a High Priest, atoning for his sins and those of his people. Every synagogue, in Israel or elsewhere, became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem. Every table became an altar, every act of charity or hospitality, a kind of sacrifice.**

6. “every table became an altar ...”

- a. This is why Ashkenazi Jews developed the tradition (after saying the blessing “.... *hamotzi lechem min ha-Aretz*) of dipping a piece of *challah* into **salt** before eating it—because all of the grain offerings in the Tabernacle/Temple were seasoned with salt (Lev 2:13).

Torah study, once the speciality of the priesthood, became the right and obligation of everyone. Not everyone could wear the crown of priesthood, but everyone could wear the crown of Torah. **A mamzer talmid hakham, a Torah scholar of illegitimate birth, say the sages, is greater than an am haaretz Kohen Gadol, an ignorant High Priest.** Out of the devastating tragedy of the loss of the Temple, the sages created a religious and social order that came closer to the ideal of the people as “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” than had ever previously been realised. The seed had been planted long before, in the opening of Leviticus 19: “speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them, ‘Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy?’”

7. The crown of priesthood, symbolized by the altar, and the crown of the monarchy, symbolized by the ark, perhaps because David restored the ark from a long period of neglect, were made hereditary. However, **heredity plays no role with regard to the crown of the table, that is, the crown of learning, which is accessible to all** but must be personally attended by each aspirant to its dignity.³

- a. Maimonides,⁴ Talmud Torah (Study of the Torah) 3:1⁵

The crown of Torah, behold, it lies and is available for every Israelite. As the verse says: ‘Moses commanded us a law, even the inher-

itance of the congregation of Jacob’ (Deu 33:4). **All who wish may come and take it up.**

- b. Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud Torah (The Laws of Torah Study) 3:7
Lest one say, “I will gather money and then return to Torah study; I will buy what I need and be free of preoccupation and then I will study”—know that if such thoughts enter your heart and mind you will never merit the crown of Torah.

Holiness belongs to all of us when we turn our lives into the service of God, and society into a home for the Divine Presence.

³ Martin Sicker, *The Moral Maxims of the Sages of Israel*, (iUniverse, Inc.), p. 232.

⁴ Rambam, Rabbeinu Moshe ben Maimon (Our Rabbi/Teacher Moses Son of Maimon) (c. 1135–1204), a preeminent medieval Sephardic Jewish philosopher and astronomer, became one of the most prolific and influential Torah scholars and physicians of the Middle Ages.

⁵ www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/910975/jewish/Talmud-Torah-Chapter-Three.htm