

“Holiness – It’s Ours for the Doing”

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Temple Sinai

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What is holiness? Well first, what is it not? It is not ritual. It is not the possession of a select few. It is not achieved by retreating from the world or from society – quite the opposite. It is secured only by immersing oneself in life’s dark, secret, messy, unmentionable immoralities and shedding a determined light upon it – to make a difference for the better!

Solomon Schechter, the organizational founder of the American Jewish Conservative Movement and a great Jewish scholar once asked: “Where are the Jewish saints? Others have long lists, but where are ours?”

Schechter answered his own question: “Jewish saints do not form a sect apart. You’ll find them in the midst of community.”

Dag Hammarskjöld notes: “In our time, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.”

How does our prayer book put it?

There is holiness when we strive to be true to the best we know.

There is holiness when we are kind to someone who cannot possibly be of service to us.

There is holiness when we forget what divides us and remember what unites us.

There is holiness when we love – truly, honestly, and unselfishly.

There is holiness when we remember the lonely and bring cheer into our dark corner.

There is holiness when we share – our bread, our ideas, our enthusiasms.

So, what does it all amount to, this thing called holiness? The idea of holiness implies that what we do and what we make of our lives matters not only to us as solitary individuals, not only to society, but to the entire order of the universe.

And the laws of holiness are addressed not just to a few individuals, but to an entire community – the goal not being to crown a few saints, but rather to create a consecrated and holy people. The proof of the people’s holiness – our credentials for holiness – is evidenced by our everyday and every-night conduct: our actions toward our family and friends; our civic and public behavior, our business ethics, and our reverence for God.

Belief is way down the list on the Jewish scale of priorities for holiness. Action counts as the ultimate determiner of human quality.

To profane the name of God has implications far more profound and weighty than taking God's name in vain. Bamburgher states:

To profane the name of God means to impair God's reputation in the non-Israelite world...Any behavior that brings public disgrace upon Jews and Judaism is Chilul-ha-Shem – profanation of the Divine Name, just as any action which enhances the dignity and honor of Judaism is Kiddush ha-Shem – the sanctification of the name of God.

Obviously, the Golden Rule meets these criteria – “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Notice these commandments reflect action and doing:

1. You shall be holy.
2. Keep My Sabbaths.
3. When you reap the harvest –
4. Leave them for the poor.
5. Don't steal, deal falsely or defraud.
6. Give the wages of the day worker in a timely fashion.
7. Don't insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.
8. Render fair judgments.
9. Don't hate your kinsman, bear a grudge or take vengeance.
10. Love your neighbor as yourself.

In a magnificent address I heard over 20 years ago, Rabbi Harold Shulweis of California, speaking to my fellow rabbis of the CCAR, underscored the importance of the Chavurah movement, observing –

Feeling is not doing; believing is not doing;
knowing is not doing...people tend to believe
what they do rather than do what they believe;
people tend to feel what they do rather than do
what they feel; people tend to know what they do
rather than to do what they know.

So you see what I mean when I say that for Jews, “Holiness is really ours for the doing”?

Amen