

COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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— RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



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The Ethic of Holiness

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With Tetzaveh something new enters Judaism: *Torat cohanim*, the world and mindset of the priest. Rapidly it became a central dimension of Judaism. It dominates the next book of the Torah, Vayikra. Until now, though, priests in the Torah have had a marginal presence.

For the first time in our parsha we encounter the idea of a hereditary elite within the Jewish people, Aaron and his male descendants, whose task was to minister in the sanctuary. For the first time we find the Torah speaking about *robes of office*: those of the priests and the high priest worn while officiating in the sacred place. For the first time too we encounter the phrase, used about the robes: *lekavod ule-tiferet*, “for glory and beauty.” Until now *kavod* in the sense of glory or honour has been attributed only to God. As for *tiferet*, this is the first time it has appeared in the Torah. It opens up a whole dimension of Judaism, namely the aesthetic.

All these phenomena are related to the *mishkan*, the sanctuary, the subject of the preceding chapters. They emerge from the project of making a “home” for the infinite God within finite space. The question I want to ask here, though, is: do they have anything to do with *morality*? With the kind of lives the Israelites were called on to live and their relationships to one another? If so, how? And why does the priesthood appear specifically at this point in the story?

It is common to divide the religious life in Judaism into two dimensions. There was the priesthood and the sanctuary, and there were the prophets and the people. The priests focused on the relationship between the people and God, *mitzvot bein adam la-Makom*. Prophets focused on the relationship between the people and one another, *mitzvot bein adam le-chavero*. The priests supervised ritual and the prophets spoke about ethics. One group was concerned with holiness, the other with virtue. You don't need to be holy to be good. You need to be good to be holy, but that is an entrance requirement, not what being holy is about. Pharaoh's daughter who rescued Moses when he was a baby, was good but not holy. These are two separate ideas.

In this essay I want to challenge that conception. The priesthood and the sanctuary made a moral difference, not just a spiritual one. Understanding how they did so is important not only to our understanding of history but also to how we lead our lives today. We can see this by looking at some important recent experimental work in the field of moral psychology.

Our starting point is American psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his book, *The Righteous Mind*. Haidt makes the point that in contemporary secular societies our *range* of moral sensibilities has become very narrow. He calls such societies WEIRD – Western, educated, industrialized, rich and democratic. They tend to see more traditional cultures as rigid, hidebound and repressive. People from those traditional cultures tend to see Westerners as weird in abandoning much of the richness of the moral life.

To take a non-moral example: A century ago in most British and American (non-Jewish) families, dining was a formal occasion. The family ate together and would not begin until everyone was at the table. They would begin with grace, thanking God for the food they were about to eat. There was an order in which people were served or served themselves. Conversation around the table was governed by conventions. There were things you might discuss and others deemed unsuitable.

Today that has changed completely. Many British homes do not have a dining table. A recent survey showed that half of all meals in Britain are eaten alone. The members of the family come in at different times, take a meal from the freezer, heat it in the microwave, and eat it watching a television or computer screen. That is not dining but serial grazing.

Haidt became interested in the fact that his American students reduced morality to two principles, one relating to harm, the other to fairness. On harm they thought like John Stuart Mill who said, that “the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” For Mill this was a political principle but it has become a moral one: if it doesn’t harm others, we are morally entitled to do what we want.

The other principle is fairness. We don’t all have the same idea of what is fair and what not, but we all care about basic rules of justice: what is right for some should be right for all, do as you would be done to, don’t bend the rules to your advantage and so on. Often the first moral sentence a young child utters is, “That’s not fair.” John Rawls formulated the best known modern statement of fairness: “Each person has an equal right to the most extensive liberties compatible with similar liberties for all.”

Those are the ways WEIRD people think. If it’s fair and does no harm, it is morally permissible. However – and this is Haidt’s fundamental point – there are at least three other dimensions of the moral life as understood in non-WEIRD cultures throughout the world.

One is *loyalty* and its opposite, betrayal. Loyalty means that I am prepared to make sacrifices for the sake of my family, my team, my co-religionists and my fellow citizens, the groups that help make me the person I am. I take their interests seriously, not just my own.

Another is *respect for authority* and its opposite, subversion. Without this no institution is possible, perhaps no culture either. The Talmud illustrates this with a famous story about a would-be proselyte who came to Hillel and said, “Convert me to Judaism on condition that I accept only the Written Torah, not the Oral Torah.” Hillel began to teach him Hebrew. The first day he taught him aleph-bet-gimmel. The next day he taught him gimmel-bet-aleph. The man protested, “Yesterday you taught me the opposite.” Hillel replied, “You see, you have to rely on me even to learn the aleph-bet. Rely on me also about the Oral Torah.”¹ Schools, armies, courts, professional associations, even sports, depend on respect for authority.

The third arises from the need to ring-fence certain values we regard as non-negotiable. They are not mine to do with as I wish. These are the things we call *sacred*, sacrosanct, not to be treated lightly or defiled.

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¹ Shabbat 31a.

Why are loyalty, respect and the sacred not how liberal elites think in the West? The most fundamental answer is that WEIRD societies define themselves as groups of autonomous individuals seeking to pursue their own interests with minimal interference from others. Each of us is a self-determining individual with our own wants, needs and desires. Society should let us pursue those desires as far as possible without interfering in our or other people's lives. To this end, we have developed principles of rights, liberty and justice that allow us peacefully to coexist. If an act is unfair or causes someone to suffer, we are prepared to condemn it morally, but not otherwise.

Loyalty, respect and sanctity do not naturally thrive in secular societies based on market economics and liberal democratic politics. The market erodes loyalty. It invites us not to stay with the product we have used until now but to switch to one that is better, cheaper, faster, newer. Loyalty is the first victim of market capitalism's "creative destruction."

Respect for figures of authority – politicians, bankers, journalists, heads of corporations – has been falling for many decades. We are living through a loss of trust and the death of deference. Even the patient Hillel might have found it hard to deal with someone brought up on the creed of "We don't need no education, We don't need no thought control."

As for the sacred, that too has been lost. Marriage is no longer seen as a holy commitment, a covenant. At best it is viewed as a contract. Life itself is in danger of losing its sanctity with the spread of abortion on demand at the beginning and "assisted dying" at the end.

What makes loyalty, respect and sanctity key moral values is that they *create a moral community* as opposed to a group of autonomous individuals. Loyalty bonds the individual to the group. Respect creates structures of authority that allow people to function effectively as teams. Sanctity binds people together in a shared moral universe. The sacred is where we enter the realm of that-which-is-greater-than-the-self. The very act of gathering as a congregation can lift us into a sense of transcendence in which we merge our identity with that of the group.

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Once we understand this distinction we can see how the moral universe of the Israelites changed over time. Abraham was chosen by God "so that he will instruct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the lord by doing what is right and just" (*tzedakah umishpat*). What his servant looked for when choosing a wife for Isaac was kindness, *chessed*. These are the key prophetic virtues. As Jeremiah said in God's name: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom, or the strong of their strength, or the rich of their wealth but let one who boasts, boast about this: that they have the understanding to know Me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness (*chessed mishpat u-tzedakah*) on earth, for in these I delight" (Jer. 9: 23-24).

Kindness is the equivalent of care which is the opposite of harm. Justice and righteousness are specific forms of fairness. In other words the prophetic virtues are close to those that prevail today in the liberal democracies of the West. That is a measure of the impact of the Hebrew Bible on the West, but that is another story for another time. The point is that kindness and fairness are about relationships between individuals. Until Sinai, the Israelites *were* just individuals, albeit part of the same extended family that had undergone exodus and exile together.

After the revelation at Mount Sinai the Israelites were a covenanted people. They had a sovereign: God. They had a written constitution: the Torah. They had agreed to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Yet at the golden calf they showed that they had not yet understood what it is to be a nation. They were a mob. The Torah says, "Moses saw that the people were *running wild* and that Aaron had let them *get out of control* and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies." That was the crisis to which the sanctuary and the priesthood were the answer. They turned Jews into a nation.

The service of the sanctuary performed by the cohanim in their robes worn *le-kavod*, "for honour," established the principle of *respect*. The mishkan itself embodied the principle of *the sacred*. Set in the middle of the camp, the Sanctuary and its service turned the Israelites into a circle at whose centre was God.

And even though, after the destruction of the Second Temple, there was no more sanctuary or functioning priesthood, Jews found substitutes that performed the same function. What *Torat cohanim* brought into Judaism was the choreography of holiness and respect that helped Jews walk and dance together as a nation.

Two further research findings are relevant here. Richard Sosis analysed a series of voluntary communities set up by various groups in the course of the nineteenth century, some religious, some secular. He discovered that the religious communes had an average lifespan of *more than four times longer* than their secular counterparts. There is something about the religious dimension that turns out to be important, even essential, in sustaining community.

We now also know on the basis of considerable neuro-scientific evidence that we make our choices on the basis of emotion rather than reason. People whose emotional centres (specifically the ventromedial prefrontal cortex) have been damaged can analyse alternatives in great detail, but they can't make good decisions. One interesting experiment revealed that academic books on ethics were more often stolen or never returned to libraries than books on other branches of philosophy.² Expertise in moral reasoning, in other words, does not necessarily make us more moral. Reason is often something we use to rationalise choices made on the basis of emotion.

That explains the presence of the aesthetic dimension of the service of the sanctuary. It had beauty, gravitas and majesty. In the time of the Temple it had music. There were choirs of Levites singing psalms. Beauty speaks to emotion and emotion to the soul, lifting us in ways reason cannot do to heights of love and awe, taking us above the narrow confines of the self into the circle at whose centre is God.

The sanctuary and priesthood introduced into Jewish life the ethic of *kedushah*, holiness, which strengthened the values of loyalty, respect and the sacred by creating an environment of *reverence*, the humility felt by the people once they had these symbols of the Divine presence in their midst. As Maimonides wrote in a famous passage in *The Guide for the Perplexed*,³ We do not act when in the presence of a king as we do when we are merely in the company of friends or family. In the sanctuary people sensed they were in the presence of the King.

Reverence gives power to ritual, ceremony, social conventions and civilities. It helps transform autonomous individuals into a collectively responsible group. You cannot sustain a national identity or even a marriage without loyalty. You cannot socialise successive generations without respect for figures of authority. You cannot defend the non-negotiable value of human dignity without a sense of the sacred. That is why the prophetic ethic of justice and compassion, had to be supplemented with the priestly ethic of holiness.

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² Haidt, 89

³ Guide, III: 51.