

B"H

Parshat Emor

Do Our Hearts Have Room for God?

from Harav Yitzchak Ginsburgh

Desecration and Sanctification

The central theme in the Torah portion of *Emor* reaches its climax at the end of the third section of the portion,¹

You shall not desecrate My holy Name, and I shall be sanctified in the midst of the children of Israel, for I am God that sanctifies you.

This verse contains a pair of separate, but complementary commandments. The first, a negative commandment, is the prohibition of desecrating God's Name. The second, a positive commandment, is that we should sanctify God's Name.

The Negative Vacuum

The Hebrew word used in the verse for "you shall not desecrate" (תִּחַלְלֵנִי) stems from the verb that also means "a vacuum" (חֶלְלָה). Though today we usually think of a vacuum as referring to a lack of air or other gases, conceptually a vacuum represents any area of existence that is wanting. For example, the Hebrew word for vacuum also denotes a corpse,² because the corpse is a body without a breath of life, without a soul.

From this we can understand that the desecration of God's Name occurs whenever it may seem that God is absent from a particular part of reality. Maimonides explains that if a Jew, particularly a highly regarded Jew, behaves in an (even) apparently inappropriate manner, he has desecrated God's Name. Because, inappropriate behavior suggests that God is not present and that He is making no demands on our conduct. Inappropriate behavior therefore projects that God is not present in reality—reality is vacant of the Almighty, which of course is not true.

Sanctification: Consciousness of God

The commandment that complements the prohibition of desecrating God's Name is of course the positive commandment that we sanctify God's Name. Just as desecration projects an apparent absence of God, sanctifying God's Name brings the consciousness



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of God to the foreground of reality; sanctifying God means making ourselves and others aware of God's Presence. The Hebrew verb "to sanctify" (שקד) is the same as the verb meaning "to make holy."

The literal meaning of "holy" in Hebrew is something that is transcendent or separate. Thus, to be more precise, when we sanctify God's Name, we are actually bringing God's transcendent nature into our immanent reality. We can achieve this by reflecting our Godly, rectified character traits as intensely as possible in all that we do. This is the greatest sanctification of God's Name.

The Revelation of the Divine Soul of Israel

Of all 248 positive commandments, all of which require action on our part, sanctifying God is the only one that is stated in passive form. In other words, instead of writing, "You shall sanctify God," the Torah writes, "And I [God] shall be sanctified."

At first we might think that the passive tone of the commandment implies that sanctifying God requires no action; it just happens by itself. But, paradoxically, the opposite is true. In its most complete form, the commandment to sanctify God's Name is the most intense of all the positive commandments of the Torah. Let us explain the nature of this paradox.

There are three prohibitions that a Jew must not transgress, even under the threat of death. These are: idol worship, adultery and murder. If one is being coerced to transgress any of these prohibitions whether in public or even in private, one must choose to die rather than perform any of these three prohibitions. Incidentally, if there is a public decree prohibiting the fulfillment of any of the commandments and one is being forced to submit to this decree in public the same ruling applies. This is the moral choice that many Jews have had to make throughout history.

Choosing to die, while facing a life threatening moral dilemma, is the ultimate demonstration of self-sacrifice. To make such a choice, a person has to completely negate his ego, whose first directive is self-survival. When the ego is so totally negated, the space that it (figuratively) occupied in the heart becomes vacant and hollow, allowing God's transcendence to appear. Willingness to give up one's life in order to stand by a moral decision reveals that God is fully present in our reality.

Normally, it is impossible for us to act without employing our ego. The Ba'al Shem Tov explained that the verse, "For there is no such individual who is a *tzadik* who does good and does not transgress,"³ should be understood as saying that even within the good that we do there is a transgression—the self interest out of which we act in the first place, or the feeling of accomplishment we receive upon completing a good act. But,

when a person reaches a state in which he is willing to give up his life to do the right thing, then there is no ego, no sense of self that is acting in self-interest. Such an act is absolutely selfless. Therefore, the passive form of the commandment, “And I shall be sanctified.” At the moment of ultimate sanctification, the heart is void of any self-interest and open to the spontaneous and natural flow of Divine consciousness. At this moment the person becomes a perfect conduit for the Divine will, acting as it were passively (relative to all other actions). At that moment it is as if God is staring out from the person’s eyes—absolutely present and palpable to all around him. Whether in the end the individual indeed dies or continues to live, he has revealed that only God exists. He has brought God’s transcendent omnipresence into the world. More than any other commandment, this is the revelation of the Divine soul of Israel—a part of God above.⁴

God’s Name

The prophet Zachariah foresaw the future when “God will be one and His Name will be one.”⁵ What is the difference between God and His Name?

Just as the name of a person reflects his presence in reality (we only call someone by name when we experience that they are present), so the Name of God reflects our conscious awareness of His Presence in our reality. When Zachariah promises that “God will Be one,” he is referring to God’s role in actively revealing Himself to the world—God will actively reveal Himself. The second part of the verse, “His Name will be one,” describes that we, as His creation, will actively seek to be conscious of God’s Presence in every facet of our existence, both psychological and physical.

The Story of the Blasphemer

The theme of desecrating God’s Name appears a second time at the end *parshat Emor*. The Torah relates⁶ the story of the man who blasphemed God’s Name while the Jewish People were in the desert. This man was the son of a woman whose name was Shlomit the daughter of Divri (שְׁלֹמִית בַּת דִּבְרִי).

The sages learn from her name that she was improperly prone to greet everyone she met, women and men, Jews and Egyptians, alike. This immodest habit of being overly friendly and loquacious made her vulnerable to evil. She was eventually raped by an Egyptian who masqueraded as her husband, and gave birth to this son. The sages further reveal that it was this Egyptian whom Moshe Rabbeinu killed when he saw him beating a Jewish man who was actually Shlomit’s husband. This was the first time that Moshe Rabbeinu acted as the redeemer of Israel (and the first of Moshe’s acts that the Torah describes). As a result, Pharaoh sentenced Moshe to death, forcing him to flee

Egypt.⁷ It was Shomit's son, who blasphemed God in anger, because he learnt that he would not receive a parcel of land in the Land of Israel together with the rest of the men of his tribe.

The Connection between Blaspheming and Desecrating

Now, the Hebrew root of “blaspheme” is קלל. The Hebrew root of “desecrate” is חלל. The only difference between these two roots is their first letter, *chet* (ח) and *kuf* (ק). Both words end with a double *lamed* (ל). Because the initial letters, *chet* and *kuf* are interchangeable in the letter transformation called *Albam*, the two roots are obviously related.⁸

The penalty of the blasphemer was death. Following our earlier observations, this can be understood. Just as by blaspheming God, he meant to create a vacuum void of God's Presence, so he was punished by his body being emptied of his soul. The blasphemy—whose root is קלל—was meant to make a vacuum—whose root is חלל. Likewise, his body became a corpse, which as we saw above is written the same way, חלל.

The Positive Vacuum

The two identical letters in “blaspheme” and “desecrate” (or “vacuum”) are the two *lamed*'s (לל). Rabbi Avraham Abulafia teaches⁹ that the human heart is shaped like two *lamed*'s facing one another: ׀. Indeed, the product of two *lamed*'s (each is equal to 3) is 900. But, 900 is the exact numerical value of the letter fillings of the two roots, blaspheme and desecrate (חית למד למד קוף למד למד):

But, based on everything we have seen so far, the double *lamed* as a symbol of the heart even more strongly suggests the verse,¹⁰

And my heart is hollow (חלל) within me.

As explained in the *Tanya*, King David describes that he has killed his evil inclination leaving his heart empty or hollow. Since the word translated here as “hollow” (חלל) is the same word as “corpse,” we could also render the translation as “And my heart is like a corpse within me.” In place of his evil inclination, King David had created a vacuum in his heart, leaving it wide open for God's transcendence to enter. Thus, while in our *parshah*, *parshat Emor*, the root חלל designates a negative state of the heart, leading one to desecrate God's sanctity, it can also mean a positive state of the heart, in which God's sanctity (His transcendence, as above) is revealed. By working on his character traits with intensity, King David was able to rectify the innate negative state of his heart,

transforming it into a hollow conduit revealing God's transcendence and sanctifying His Name.

Just as a heart "void" of God's Presence (חלל) leads a person to "blaspheme" God (קלל), so the rectified heart, which like King David's is "hollow" of ego (חלל), leads to the positive meaning of the same verb that also means "blasphemy" (קלל). The positive form of this verb, קלל, is found in Ezekiel's description of the Divine chariot. Ezekiel describes each of the four-faced angels carrying the Divine chariot as as having,¹¹

Feet like the foot of a calf, shimmering like refined, brilliant bronze.

Thus, the positive vacuum of the heart (חלל) creates space for the shining emotive experience of the heart (קלל).

A New Revelation

Let us apply what we have learned about the letters *kuf* and *chet* being interchangeable to the root of the word "sanctification," the positive commandment in the verse we started out with. The root of "sanctification" is שקד, which also begins with the letter *kuf* (ק).

Substituting the *kuf* in this root (שקד) with a *chet* (ח), we get the root שח, which means either "new," or "renew." Indeed, the Hebrew word for "month" (שח) is spelled with the same letters, alluding to the renewal or rebirth of the moon on the first day of the month. In another example of the interchangeability of the letters *kuf* (ק) and *chet* (ח), the Torah commands us to "sanctify" (שקד) the "new" (שח) "moon" (שח). Quoting the sages, *Rashi* explains that when commanding Moshe to sanctify the new moon, He pictured its shape at the moment of its rebirth, commanding, "When you see this, sanctify it."¹²

Newness is a novelty. Whenever we encounter a completely new phenomenon, we must think about how to sanctify it. The most novel phenomenon in our world is when the transcendent—that which is beyond all natural phenomena—is intensely revealed to our consciousness. This is exactly what happens when a Jew merits to see the inaction of the commandment, "I shall become sanctified." When a person is willing to give up his life for God, his ego has vanishes and God's transcendent nature takes over. This creates a totally new (immanent) manifestation of God's transcendent nature—a novel revelation of God never before experienced in the world. God's absolute transcendence, his "sanctity" (שקד), is newly (שח) revealed, becoming omnipresent and immanent.

The Perceptions of the Heart and the Mind

The two pairs of roots that we have seen relate to the emotive faculties of the heart and to the intellectual faculties of the mind. We have already seen that חלל and קלל (desecration and blasphemy) relate to the emotional realm of the heart, the realm which King David rectified by making it into a holy hollow corpse, void of ego. The second pair of roots, קדש and חדש (sanctify and renew) reflect the pure perception of the mind's inner eye, as in God's instruction to Moses, "When you see this (new moon), sanctify it." All pure perceptions (sight, sound, etc.) are mental faculties. Thus, the difference between the mind and the heart is the difference between pure perception and the emotive response to what is perceived. Thus, the perceptive faculties of our minds need to be sanctified and renewed, while the emotive faculties of the heart first need to be made into a vacuum, a space void of ego, and only then can be sanctified.

Parshat Emor prompts us to concentrate on nullifying our ego to allow God's transcendence to enter our hearts. Transcendence is always new, transforming the negativity of desecration and blasphemy into rectified emotions of the heart, which will shine brightly and sanctify God's Name in all our deeds.

1. Leviticus 22:32.

2. See Deuteronomy 21:1.

3. Ecclesiastes 7:20.

4. *Tanya*, ch. 2.

5. Zachariah 14:9.

6. Leviticus 24:10 and on.

7. Incidentally, just as Moshe's first act was to save a fellow Jew, his final words recorded by the Torah (Deuteronomy 33:29) are his last will and testament said as a blessing to the entire Jewish people,

Blessed are you, Israel. What nation like you finds salvation in God, He is the shield that comes to your aid and He is the pride of your sword; your enemies will conceal their identity, yet you shall tread upon their throats.

Indeed, the names of the three ministers of war of the first three kings of Israel were *Avner ben Ner*, *Yoav ben Tzruyah*, and *Bnayahu ben Yehoyada*. The sum of the *gematrias* of their names (אבנר יואב בניהו) is 345, the same as that of Moshe (משה), suggesting that Moshe Rabbeinu merited being the leader of the Jewish people because of his ability to stand up to their enemies.

⁸. See *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 6:4. The sages quote another verse related to desecration, "...for the desecration of God is one who is hanging..." (Deuteronomy 21:23) and explain that it means that this person's body is hanging from a tree (after having been put to death) because he blasphemed God, and because of this God's Name is desecrated.

See also the *Ba'al Haturim* on Leviticus 24:10, on the verse in our *parshah* that begins the account of the blasphemer. The *Ba'al Haturim* explains that this account follows the

commandment to keep the Shabbat in our *parshah* because one who breaks the Shabbat is called a desecrater (מחלל) of the Shabbat, which is phonetically similar to blaspheming (מקלל) God.

Finally see *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 7:4 where the phonetic similarity between a desecration and blaspheming appears in reference to those offenses punishable by stoning. In this case, one who desecrates the Shabbat is immediately followed by one who curses (blasphemes) his parents.

Numerically, the average value of the six letters of these two roots (חלל קלל) is 38, which is the value of the two-letter root of "desecrate" (חלל), חל. Indeed, in the phrase, "He who separates the holy from the mundane" (הַמְבַדֵּיל בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחַל), the mundane is written using this two letter root. The value of this phrase, which we recite in the *Havdalah* is $625 = 25^2 = 5^4$. 625 is also the *gematria* of the letter filling of "Adam" (אָדָם), אֵלֶּף דַּלֶּת מֵם.

⁹. Based on this teaching, we have designed the Jewish Heart, a piece of jewelry that is a symbol of love between husband and wife. For more information see, <http://www.inner.org/goldjewelry>.

¹⁰. Psalms 109:22.

¹¹. Ezekiel 1:7.

¹². *Rashi* to Exodus 12:2, based on *Rosh Hashanah* 20a.