

# Jewish Idea of Holiness

By Rabbi Samuel Silver

What is the Jewish concept of "holiness?" The word is used very frequently. Like so many words from the religious lexicon it has even found its way into colloquialism. To many people something that is holy is something that is separated from the phenomena of normal living. A holy object must be treated with special veneration. It must be kept in a particular place. It must be handled gingerly. It must be displayed only on solemn occasions. It is somehow detached from our regular, day-to-day experiences.

In Judaism holiness is not measured by the degree to which you remove yourself from life. It is determined by what you do in the very thick of your daily life. In Judaism sacred vessels are treated with respect, but not with awe. They are not objects invested with magical qualities, but they are mementos of what you must do every day if you are to impart a touch of meaningfulness to your existence.

Jewish Torahs are well-worn, and should be, for the Torah is not venerated as a mystical relic but is to serve as a guide for your course of activities every week. The Kiddush cup can be touched, handled, and fingered by all, for it has no other purpose but to remind you that, in the midst of commercial and domestic transactions, it is incumbent upon you to engender sweetness if you are to live up to God's expectations. The Shofar is a holy object in Judaism, not because it can produce some miracle but because it is a call to conscience,


a call that you are supposed to heed not only in the synagogue but in the office, in the neighborhood where you live and in the home. In short, in Judaism holiness is not something apart from life, but something which is part of life.

To illustrate the Jewish idea of holiness, let us take a few examples. Money would certainly not normally be regarded as a sacred item: it represents utter materialism and is a symbol of cupidity. But when you take some of your money and, denying yourself something you might yearn for, donate it to a good cause, you have achieved an act of holiness. Indeed, then the money itself is transformed from something secular into something sacred. You have made it holy by the use you have put it to. You have performed a sacrifice. And if you will look up the origin of the word, sacrifice, you will discover that it means to make sacred. You have made it holy by the use you have put it to. You have performed a sacrifice. And if you will look up the origin of the word, sacrifice, you will discover that it means to make sacred. Holiness, therefore, in Judaism, is not a quality; it is a process. Objects and acts are not endowed with an independent quality known as holiness; they become so by the nature of their usage.

The Pharisees, those badly maligned architects of the Jewish faith whom we designate as "the rabbis," have filled the Talmud with instances of how holiness can be achieved. They have told us that lust, canalized and elevated through a decent family life, can be transformed into love. They have told us that ambition, applied not only to the gratification of one's ego, but raised to the point where one is ambitious to serve others, can be lifted to the point of holiness. They have told us that the human quest of joy can be hallowed so that we can ultimately derive as much delight from giving as we instinctively derive from getting. They have told us that hatred, directed not at individuals but at evil, can be the source of much good. They have told us that virtually any mundane phenomenon

can be sanctified or hallowed, that it is indeed the objective of religion to transmute the material into the moral, the homely into the holy. So, if our synagogue and in our homes let us, with renewed insight, understand what is expected of us if we are to live up to the criteria of holiness a la Judaism.

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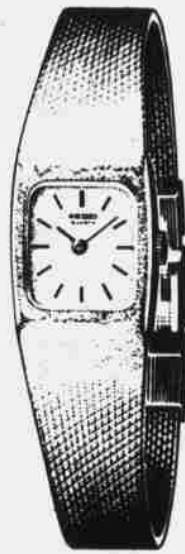
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