

WHAT IS "HOLY"!?

by Rabbi Label Lam

Hashem said to Moses: Say to the Kohanim, the sons of Aaron, and tell them: Each of you shall not contaminate himself... They shall be holy to their G-d and not desecrate the name of their G-d...(Vayikra 21:1/6)

Hashem spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: Hashem's appointed festivals that you are to designate as holy convocations-these are My appointed festivals...(Vayikra 23:1-2)

Two main themes dominate the reading this week; 1) That holy class of people, Kohanim and their peculiar restrictions 2) Those holy- times we call festivals and their unique observances. Maybe it's too obvious to investigate the connection between two things that are holy. More basic is the question, "what is 'holy'?"

I was thrown into the swimming pool of public speaking a bunch of years back. If I had any fears they were either confirmed or dispelled by the following incident. I was involved with a tour consisting of a few dozen-college students who were visiting Israel for the first time. Friday night at the Kosel, the Western Wall, the head of our contingency led us in a twenty-minute dance around the plaza where many groups had gathered to pray.

By the time we had finished, our numbers had swelled to hundreds. The one, who had so enthusiastically orchestrated the dancing, now pulled everyone close around him for a quiet word before the evening Shabbos prayer. When he had their attention, he stepped out and pushed me in urging me to say something. I was totally unprepared. The awe of that Wall and the place was plenty to strike me silent. I looked up at the faces of the now hundreds of people. I felt like that ubiquitous deer on the highway with the truck bearing down, Bambi, frozen and staring into the headlights.

With help from heaven I was able to open my mouth. I asked, "What are we all doing here? Are we here to talk to the wall?" I saw some heads beginning to nod. "This is the last unsullied, non-commercial, holy place in the world. There exists within each of us also a pure and unexploited point of holiness, as well. Here on the Holy Shabbos, that remnant of holiness within us has been drawn magnetically to this hold-out of holiness.

I realized quickly that the word "holy" was a dead word for most and even me. What was I saying? I needed to define and add color to the term- "holy". With even more continued help from heaven, it

occurred to me that just days earlier I was been walking through the streets of New York City. I too was searching for holiness. I asked, "What holiness is to be found there? What do people treat as holy? Where do we find in a world of cynicism and shattered idols that there is a place where everyone universally acts with old time reverence? In only one place- At the ATM room.

Everyone, even in bustling NYC, enters quietly and respectfully. Each inserts their piece of plastic. The machine engages us so politely and clearly. Then we enter our PIN# and wait for the good news. Chamber music might be appropriate as the confessional screen lights up and tells us the brutal truth.

We have made withdrawals, too many. We have made deposits. We are flirting dangerously with the over draft. A record is there of all our transactions if we wish. The final request and closing and we each back up three steps as if from a silent prayer, "Oseh Shalom Bimromav..." putting the receipt or money privately and deeply into our pocket. We have been touched.

The same is when we approach the Wall in prayer. Although we all hold the same Prayer Book and say the same words, as the plastic card, we each have a personal identification number. We are weighing in collectively and individually and making ourselves aware of our spiritual bank accounts. We have made withdrawals. We have made deposits...etc."

It has occurred to me that the money industry has usurped the best words for what we seek in personal relationships, Mutual, Fidelity, Trust, Bond, Interest, Provident, Security, Exchange, and even more. It's not a new phenomenon. King Solomon told us more than two thousand years ago, if you want to achieve authentic awe, feel it for real you must "seek it like silver". Then you'll know what is "Holy"!?

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