

SETTING HIGH GOALS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The task of being a special people, especially a holy people, is an onerous one. As difficult as it is to meet high standards on an individual basis, it is certainly extremely problematic to demand that an entire nation meet consistently high standards of behavior and morality. Thus the charge of the parsha that Israel be a holy people, a special people that sets standards of sacredness and morality, appears to be slightly unrealistic. Yet, we are all aware that the Torah does not demand of us behavior that is beyond our capability to perform.

I think that one must realize that the setting of standards is part of the Torah's mission and message to us. And for standards to be effective in human life they must be set at high, even maximum, limits. The Torah may recognize that human beings often fall short of the high standards it sets for them. But the Torah does not deem that sufficient reason for lowering or compromising its high moral demands and standards. A famous US senator pithily remarked that our current society is guilty of "defining deviancy down." It is not that the behavior of people in our time is so radically different than it was in previous times. It is rather that we have thrown away all the standards that were once the benchmark of acceptable and civilized behavior. Thus, in our new current, feel-good, anything goes, invent your own religious service world, we are far from being holy and special. Worse, we are unaware that we are supposed to be holy and special, that there are goals that we are to attempt to achieve and that life's unceasing journey always points spiritually upward.

God's demand upon us is that we somehow struggle to emulate our Creator. We are commanded to be holy "for I am holy." That is the thrust of the description that man was created in God's image. Holiness is not only performance and behavior. It is also instinct, an inner sense of right and wrong, a self-discipline, an understanding of God's will and goals for us. Though much of the Jewish world is observant in ritual behavior, I feel that few of us are godly. We perform ritual but our inner self, our very soul, is often left to atrophy and shrivel within us. We pray to God that not only should we rejoice in the observance of the Torah commandments but that, equally as important, our heart be purified to serve God, to imitate the Divine ways and to aspire to the holy standards set for us by Torah. In a world that has emptied the vessel of true holiness and cast away all standards of spiritual purity, being holy is no easy task. But again since God does not demand the impossible from us, being a holy people should still remain the standard of all Jews and of Jewish national life.

Shabat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Text Copyright © 2000 [Rabbi Berel Wein](#) and **Project Genesis, Inc.**
