

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Holiness, Heavenliness, and Heaven

Parshat Acharei Mot-Kedoshim, Leviticus 16:1 – 20:27

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

The double Torah portion of *Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* deals with some of the most important topics in the Torah: Yom Kippur, our holiest of days; holiness in the context of marriage; and the commandment, ‘be holy’ and “to love your neighbor as yourself.” What ties these topics together is the theme of holiness. As Jews we are called on to strive for holiness. We sanctify time through the Sabbath and holidays; we sanctify familial relationships by creating boundaries; we strive for the sacred in our daily lives by, ‘achieving holiness within the realm of the permitted. Holiness is not only present in the transcendent but in nature of all relationships: honesty in communications, compassion for the defenseless, and respect for the elderly. So what is holiness? Or better yet what should ask is, “When do we experience holiness in our lives?”

While we sometimes associate the holy with the mysterious, the unique insight of Judaism is that that which is holy is part of our daily lives. Theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel writes: “Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy.” Or better yet, he would teach us that all life has the potential for holiness. It is present in what we do, how we live, and who we strive to be. If there are two qualities most closely associated with holiness they are Teshuvah, repentance, and good deeds. They are the path through which we not only get into heaven but through which we get heaven into us.

Pirke Avot Chapter 4:22 Rabbi Yaakov taught: Repentance and good deeds in this world, even for an hour, are better than life in ‘the world to come;’ nevertheless, life in the world to come is more exquisite than all of life in this world.

Sources

Babylonian Talmud Yoma 39a

Our masters taught: "Neither shall you defile yourselves, for you will become even more defiled thereby" (Leviticus 11:43). When a person defiles himself by ever so little, he will be judged greatly defiled. If he defiles himself here below, he will be judged defiled up above. If he becomes defiled in this world, he will be judged defiled in the world to come. "Make yourselves holy therefore, and be ye holy." (Leviticus 11:44) When a man reaches out by ever so little for holiness, he will be judged most holy. If he reaches out for holiness here below, he will be judged holy up above. If he reaches out for holiness in this world, he will be judged holy in the world-to-come.

Song of Songs Rabba 1:1, 9

Rabbi Phinehas ben Yair said: Zeal [in the study and practice of Torah] leads to fastidiousness, fastidiousness leads to cleanness, cleanness leads to abstinence, abstinence leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to pious conduct, pious conduct leads to the holy spirit, the holy spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead.

Rabbi Louis Finkelstein

Judaism is a way of life that endeavors to transform virtually every human action into a means of communion with God.

Rabbi Avi Friedman, Parshat B’khukotai an internet D’var Torah

Martin Buber...wrote that being holy is recognizing the latent divinity in other people just as God recognizes the divinity in each of us. So, in Buber’s definition of holiness, the challenge is not to raise ourselves up – at the expense of others, perhaps. Rather, we must strive to raise others while teaching them to raise still others. Buber distinguished between what he called “I-It” relationships and “I-Thou” relationship. In an “I-It” relationship, we see others as objects that can be manipulated to our benefit or convenience. In an “I-Thou” relationship, we see others as equals with whom we give and take.

Emet Ve'emunah, Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism

During moments of travail, we can find solace in God who identifies compassionately with us in our struggles. When the world seems chaotic following bereavement, the traditional blessing *barukh dayan ha-emet* ("blessed is the righteous Judge") and the *kaddish can* provide a sense of stability and order. They serve as signposts on the road from mourning to consolation while affirming our belief that all is not chance, that there is a divine plan even when we cannot clearly discern its contours. The image of *olam ha-ba* (a hereafter) can offer hope that we will not be abandoned to the grave, that we will not suffer oblivion. Stripped of all illusions of self-sufficiency by the reality of death, we can gain a deeper consciousness of God who caringly grants us the fortitude to endure, and the ability to find meaning even in our loss

Commentary

The sages often talk about "the world to come," though they never define what they mean by this term. *Olam Ha-ba* is associated with the coming of the Messiah, resurrection, and with some type of other worldly 'after life' experience. The term has both political and spiritual connotations. Somehow the average Jewish person has come to assume that we Jews don't believe in an afterlife, though there is nothing to suggest that. *Olam Ha-ba* is often associated with some type of ultimate reward (or punishment) after death. I should mention that all five chapters of Pirke Avot begin with the statement, "All Israel has a portion in the world to come, for it is written: Thy people are all righteous; they shall inherit the land forever, the branch of my planting, the work of my hands, that I may be glorified."

The attitude toward *Olam Ha-ba* is best reflected in Rabbi Yaakov's statement above. The world to come, whether it refers to other worldly or worldly salvation is not nearly as important or significant as the opportunities presented in this world: repentance and good deeds. These are the two key ideas presented in our Torah portion: Yom Kippur is the opportunity to renew ones life with atonement and repentance, and to strive for a life of holiness is presented as living a life of good deeds. In the "world to come" there is no opportunity for change or growth; all is as it should be. This world provides us with the opportunity and the challenges of transformation which is far more valuable than all the blessings of the 'world to come. On the other hand, who would not choose to live for even a moment in an ideal world of goodness and wholeness?

In speaking to church groups over the years I often tell them that Judaism is far more concerned with "Getting heaven into man (sic) than it is with getting man (sic) into heaven." If that is true, then, the Parshiot of *Acharei Mot* and *Kedoshim* are the very soul of the Torah rather than the *Sh'ma Yisrael* or the Ten Commandments. All of Judaism grows out of the words, "You shall be holy." (Leviticus 19:2) Holiness is constantly returning to the very essence of who we are and what we should be.

Questions to Ponder

1. Have there been moments in your life when you have experienced a sense of holiness? If so, when? How did you know there was something holy about that moment or experience?
2. We sometimes speak about holy men or women? What makes a person 'holy?' Have you ever met someone you would define in this way? Does one have to be Jewish to be a holy person?
3. What does the term *Olam Ha-ba* mean to you? Do you believe in an afterlife? Why or why not? The Bible does not contain any explicit statements about heaven or life after death. Why do you think that is?
4. Why are good deeds and repentance better than *Olam Ha-ba* according to Rabbi Yaakov? Do you agree with him?
5. How do the sages, Finkelstein and Buber define the quest for of holiness? How can we strive for holiness in our daily lives?
6. Professor Neil Gilman speaks of the belief in *Olam Ha-ba* as one of the central myths of Judaism. In what way does this myth help us in time of sorrow? In what sense can a myth be 'true?'

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