

Holiness, Meaning and Spirituality

Saul J. Berman

Biography: Rabbi Saul J. Berman is the Director of Edah, Associate Professor at Stern College and Adjunct Professor at Columbia University School of Law.



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There are many words that we use repeatedly, such as “holiness” and “spirituality”, that mean different things to different people depending on the sensibilities that underlie their understanding. This is well illustrated by the wonderful story about a *shul* in the Midwest, built with a huge dome in which the members intended to place a large chandelier. As they built the *shul*, they ran out of money and were unable to install the chandelier. So they lived without a chandelier for many decades, but after almost half a century, through no fault of their own, the *shul* came into some money.

At a meeting of the Board of Directors one of the members of the Board stood up and said, “Now that we have the funds, I would like to make a motion that we install a chandelier.” There seemed to be some consensus around the table that that should be done. Yet in the midst of the conversation about it, an elderly gentleman, Mr. Goldberg, stood up and, red in the face, pounded on the table and said, “No. This is an Orthodox *shul*. It was built as an Orthodox *shul*, it will always remain an Orthodox *shul*, and there will be no chandelier.”

Nobody could quite understand why he was so upset, but out of respect for Mr. Goldberg, they voted down the installation of the chandelier. A number of years passed and some younger people came onto the Board, who couldn’t understand why, with so much money in the bank, the *shul* didn’t install the chandelier. They renewed the motion to install it, and again, in the midst of the discussion, Mr. Goldberg, red in the face, pounded on the table and said, “This has always been an Orthodox *shul*. As long as I’m alive it will remain an Orthodox *shul*. And there will be no chandelier.” The members of the Board sat around stunned, but this time, despite Mr. Goldberg’s objections, they voted to install the chandelier. And after the vote was taken, Mr. Goldberg, broken, stood at the table, leaned over, and

said, “Okay. You’ll have your chandelier. Now, tell me. Who is going to play it?”

I often feel that when people talk about issues of holiness and spirituality, they act in the same manner as the people in that story. Somehow one person is talking about one thing and somebody else is talking about something else, and there’s never a meeting of the minds that makes it possible for people to move further and advance the fundamental agenda of the community. If the word spirituality calls to mind some flaky new age figure, dressed in white and floating about two feet off the ground in some ascetic form, then its use will obviously not encourage those of us who tend to be relatively middle class and solidly grounded to want to move in that direction. Indeed, it will tend to make us avoid engaging with the idea altogether. Spirituality is generally understood as the opponent of materiality and as therefore offering the remedy to the collapse of meaning in Western materialism. We have been living that materialism for the past forty years. Western culture has tried to persuade us that we are the automobile that we are going to buy; that we are the kitchen that we are going to renovate in our homes; that somehow our material possessions are really the essence of who we are. That process, one hopes, is beginning to wind down, but in doing so it is leaving large numbers of people who no longer seem to know where to discover meaning in their lives and yet are still searching for alternatives. Even the Material Girl thinks that she can import meaning into her life by occasionally engaging in meditation. And within our own community, meditation and melody are also being used by some people in an effort to contend with the absence of adequate meaning.

I suggest that, at least as those approaches are commonly undertaken, they may simply be the latest steps in a long sequence of failed attempts to invest meaning.

Let's start with Rambam's assumption about the purpose of Torah. Rambam has a relatively simple and elegant assertion to make in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Book III, Chapters 27 and 28. Rambam contends that every *mitsvah* of the Torah, without exception, has one of three purposes at its core. First, the *mitsvah* may be intended to teach us some truth, enabling us to guide our lives in consonance with what is true in the world and to avoid falsity. Second, the *mitsvah* may be designed to enable us to transform ourselves and achieve moral perfection through the integration of noble moral qualities into our identities and the avoidance of the correlative false and destructive qualities. Finally, says Rambam, a *mitsvah* may be designed to help us achieve a just society and avoid the correlative injustices in human relationships.

Rambam notes that some people see *mitsvot* that appear to serve none of these purposes and conclude that they exist only to force our obedience. Rambam disagrees, denying that any of the *mitsvot* are designed simply to inculcate obedience. In his view, careful study and analysis will show that each *mitsvah* in the Torah, not only those that improve society in obvious ways but ritual *mitsvot* as well, serves one or more of these three purposes, even when that is not immediately obvious to us.

It has long been recognized by our sages that people engaged in performing a *mitsvah* often fail to connect clearly and effectively with its underlying purpose. *Hazal* regularly responded to that failing. Perhaps the first systematic response to that was the invention of *birkebot ha-mitsvah*, blessings over the performance of commandments. The rabbis envisioned, and regarded as intolerable, the prospect of a person taking the *etrog*, *lulav* and other species and simply waving them in all sorts of directions, performing the *mitsvah* with no identity-transforming thought whatsoever. To deal with that prospect, they came up with a brilliant idea: Before we pick up the *etrog* and *lulav*, we stop for a moment and utter the following words: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, who sanctified us with his commandments." The blessing recognizes that the act about to be done is a medium for the achievement of sanctity in one's life. It not only links us to God, who is the Author of this command, but it links us to this search for the sense of meaning in the act that we are about to do. "*Asher qiddeshanu be-mitsvotav ve-tzivvanu*"—He com-

manded us to do this act. The rabbis hoped that by pausing to utter these words before performing the act, the individual would be stunned into thinking about what the act means. What does it do to me when I do it? How does it transform me? How does it shape my understanding of the reality? How does it shape my values? How does it promote justice in society?

But does the utterance really have that effect? And if so, how? It was a valiant attempt by the *bakhamim*, but we are a stiff-necked people, and in our stiff-neckedness we managed to learn to recite (or mutter) the *berakhab* itself with as much rote as we brought to the act of the *mitsvah*. We managed in our great capacity to resist the struggle for meaning to totally routinize the *berakhab*. Alternatively, if we stop to think about it once in a while, we say, "Oh, that's nice." Yet we still don't allow it to spark that inner search. The *bakhamim* eventually recognized that, and tried again, adding, before recitation of the *berakhab*, an explicit statement of intention to fulfil God's command ("*Hineni mukhan u-mezuman...*"). They hoped this statement, with its clarity, would really spark that inner drive to understand what the *mitsvah* is. But we have managed to mumble that off in even less time than it takes us to mumble the *berakhab*. So the Kabbalists added another layer, specifying the recitation of "*le-shem yihud qudesha...*" (the act about to be performed is for the sake of uniting the fragmented God), before the recitation of "*Hineni mukhan u-mezuman.*"

Let's face it, there are not too many endeavors in life that could be of such extraordinary universal significance as the merging of the fragmented God, of the repair of the entire world, "with fear and with awe." The two halves of God's name will be somehow brought together in my doing this act. Nobody could possibly resist the power of that—except us.

So we have resisted, and that resistance is a major contributor to the bulk of the *siddur*. If we were not so resistant, we could have had a much shorter *siddur*, but because we keep muttering what is there, the *bakhamim*, kept adding more, in the hope of catching us by surprise and getting us to recognize that there is meaning in this. I am afraid that the new patterns of meditation and melody may simply be another step in this process of failed attempts and wind up merely producing a *siddur* even thicker than our current one. That is, if the goal of all of this is to change the way in which we

think about the elements of meaning in our lives, then somehow these preliminary preparations don't seem to have worked all that well. I have some particular feelings about why what commonly passes for spirituality may not work. But I will come back to that in a little while.

Let me first pursue further the approach that Rambam laid out for us with respect to understanding the nature of meaning. There is no biblical or even rabbinic word for spirituality. So what is the biblical, the Rabbinic understanding of what it means to be engaged in a quest to link to God? The term, of course, is “*qedushah*,” holiness. Rambam himself offers us an explanation of why the words “*Qedoshim Tihyu*” (Lev. 19:2), the divine command to be holy is not counted as a separate *mitsvah* even though the Torah is here speaking in normative language: “Be holy. Become holy.” Rambam declines to count this as a separate *mitsvah* because it is a global *mitsvah*; it is the purpose of the entire Torah. The whole of the Torah is designed to make us holy.

How do we do that? Obviously through the *mitsvot*, but let's look more closely. What are the *middot*, the personality qualities that would make us holy? Rambam asserts that there is a fundamental *mitsvah*, which he lists as the eighth of the *mitsvot asei* (positive commandments) of imitating God: the *mitsvah* of *vehalakhta bi-derakhot* (“You shall walk in His ways”). The imitation of God, says Rambam, is the fundamental mechanism by which we achieve the goal of bringing God's values into the world. That, of course, is what *qedushah* is about. *Qedushah*, holiness, is not about the process of taking ourselves out of the world; rather, *it is all about the process bringing God's values into the world*. We do this through direct behavior and through symbolic representation of those values within our lives.

Hazal say a number of times that the critical nature of the *mitsvah* of *imitateo dei*, the imitation of God, requires that we first define what qualities of God we want to imitate. *Hazal* tell us that not all of the qualities of God are appropriate for imitation by humans. What qualities of God should we imitate? Those qualities of God that are contained within the divine *middot*, the thirteen attributes by which God identifies his relational qualities. They are set out in Exod. 24, immediately after the account of the sin of the golden calf, when God instructs Moshe that the search for God's presence in

life is possible and identifies God's qualities. Those are the qualities that we need to imitate.

What are those qualities? They seem opaque in the text of the Torah. They are contained in two verses, eight of them in the first and five in the second. They are the subject of a host of different interpretations. Let me present an outline of what those qualities are, based on the various *midrashim* that deal with them, many of which are quoted by Rashi.

A-donai, the first quality, is the quality of productivity, the drive to add to the good of the world. When God created the world, He left it incomplete, so that our contribution could continue to be felt. It's not accidental that the rabbis discussed this when commenting on the exemptions to military service in discretionary wars (*milhemot reshut*). The Torah lists a series of exempt men: one who has built a house but has not yet dedicated it; one who has planted a vineyard and not yet eaten of it; one who has betrothed a woman but has not yet consummated the marriage (Duet. 20:5-7). To all of these the Torah says: Stay home and continue the productive endeavor you were engaged in. The *gemara* asks why are they in this particular order and answers that the Torah is teaching us normalcy. The Torah teaches us the normal conduct that God expects of humanity—to build homes, to plant vineyards, to marry and build a family. These are fundamental components of human productivity that are essential to any human being. It's not accidental that Rambam levels so extraordinary a critique against those who would say, “No, I don't have to engage in anything having to do with real productivity in the world. I can secrete myself in the back of the cave and there meditate on the nature of God, not engaging in the world's responsibilities, and the world will support me”. Such an attitude constitutes a failure in the imitation of God, that is to lead a life which contains the qualities of productivity, of God's own creativity, brought into the world.

The second *A-donai* is the attribute of interdependence. It is the structure that the Torah puts into place by which we Jews live interdependent lives. We live interdependently with the rest of humanity and with nature. In *qorbanot tsibbur*, the sacrifices of the entire community, communal interdependence is affirmed. *Hazal* insist that the *qorban tamid* cannot be the offering of a single person. It has to be the offering of the total community,

because we all have to understand that we cannot act as individuals in bringing an offering of ourselves to God. No one can do it for himself; we are totally interdependent.

The third is *E-l*, which is the loyalty of love and the capacity to both give and receive love. The fourth is *rahum*, which is the quality of responsibility—*arevut*. It is that whole network of *mitsvot* through which the Torah demands that we assume responsibility, not merely for ourselves, but also for the well-being of others. The inculcation of that value and the understanding that we need to live with that value deep in ourselves are essential elements of our imitation of God's character and relational qualities.

The fifth quality is *hanun*, from *hein*, referring to the process of sharing joy and pleasure. We are not complete as human beings unless we have the capacity not only to experience joy and pleasure but to share them as well. That is the quality that *Hazal* understood was present in God's *hein* toward us—that God shared in our joy, that, to use anthropomorphic language, God himself experiences joy in our joy. Similarly, we need to experience joy in each other's joy.

Erekb apayim is obvious: It is the quality of patience, of tolerance. It is the recognition that we need to be tolerant of diversity up to, but not including, complete evil. We need to be intolerant of evil, but that is a different issue that we must address at another time. In all other contexts, that quality of patience, the capacity to wait out the process, the ability to be tolerant of others and of their imperfections, as well as of ourselves and our own imperfections, is an essential Godly quality that we need to imitate in our lives.

The seventh quality is *hesed*, the quality of mercy, extended to every individual. Why is God's *hesed* called "rav" (great)? It is because God has different *hesed* for each person. That is the quality of mercy that we need to have, one that is capable of being different for each person, recognizing what that individual needs and how we can shape ourselves, our communities, our structures, and our institutions in a way that ensures the extension of that quality of mercy to each individual.

The eighth quality—the last in the first verse is the quality of *emet*, of truthfulness and honesty. This is the

fundamental source for the Torah's demand that we imitate God by distancing ourselves from falsehood and deception and by not engaging in activities that undermine the capacity of others to understand what is true and what is real in the world.

The second set of attributes begins with *notseir besed*, which is the quality of gratitude, of loyalty. It is manifested throughout the Torah: God's quality of gratitude, God's loyalty to the patriarchs, and God's loyalty to the Jewish people. This quality needs to be echoed in our own loyalty and in our capacity to offer gratitude when we are the beneficiaries of the good of others.

Next is *nosei avon*, the capacity for forgiveness. The Torah mandates us, repeatedly, *lo tiqom*; not to take vengeance, *lo titor*, not to harbour grudges—not to harbour that sense of hatred toward others in your heart—but, rather, to possess the capacity for forgiveness.

Then comes, *pesha*, God's capacity to bear our rebellion. On our part, it demands the courage to see the world go in directions that we did not expect, to see things that appear to be in a state of rebellion against everything that we value, everything that we think ought to be. It is precisely in such moments that we need to have God's quality of courage to be capable of confronting that reality and, ultimately, dealing with it.

Next there is *ve-hata'ab*, the quality of persistence. God is persistent in the face of all of the indications that we will never quite submit fully to what He wants. Nevertheless, God is persistent, and we, too, need to be persistent.

Finally, *Ve-nageb*, striving for justice. In Rambam's scheme of things, striving for justice accounts for fully two-thirds of the *mitsvot* of the Torah. All these *mitsvot* are addressed to the attempt to create justice in the world. But the foregoing qualities—productivity, interdependence, love, responsibility, shared pleasure, tolerance, mercy, honesty, loyalty, forgiveness, courage, persistence and justice—are reflected not only in the *mitsvot* that concretize them in the reality of people's lives but also in all of the symbolic, ritual *mitsvot*. They are at the core of all of the manifestations of *qedushah* in the Torah.

Where does *qedushah* exist in the Torah? What is *qadosh*

in the Torah? *Qedushah* is found in time. *Shabbat* is *qadosh* and the *mo'adim*, the festivals, are defined as *qadosh*. Places also are deemed *qadosh* in the Torah. *Har ha-bayit*, the temple mount, is the locus of God's presence. *Eretz yisra'el*, the entire of land of Israel is holy. Persons, such as the *kobanim*, also manifest *qedushah*. Also Israel is characterized as *goi qadosh*, a holy nation.

Where else can we find *qedushah* in the Torah? Obviously, *qedushah* resides in God Himself. God repeats, more often than any other claim about himself, "I, the Lord your God, am *qadosh*." God is the source of all *qedushah* in the world. Finally, *qedushah* can reside in objects, such as the ritual objects in the sanctuary. And it is noteworthy that God makes none of those objects. We make them, and we do so precisely because we have to understand that we are the ones whose productivity needs to bring *qedushah* into the world. Even in the process of making and shaping objects, the challenge we confront is bringing *qedushah* into that process.

My wife and I are about to have an extraordinary opportunity in the lives of any Jews in this world: We are about to renovate a kitchen after a small fire. Doing so has raised extraordinary challenges for us. What does it mean to renovate a kitchen with *qedushah*? You might say, "No, you don't have to think about that." But of course you have to think about that! That's exactly what you have to be thinking about: the objects and the process and what it does to you and to everyone else. That's a process in which *qedushah* is engaged.

This *qedushah* in objects is one of the vehicles through which the Torah attempts on a symbolic level to inculcate in us the deep awareness that holiness resides *here*, in this world, rather than out *there*. Holiness resides in the objects that we live with on a daily basis. All of the categories of holiness in Torah are the categories of real life. They are the categories of our time. There is nothing more real in our lives than our time. If you decide to use time productively and creatively, then you can invest meaning in your life. If you decide to kill time, then you kill meaning in your life. Similarly, holiness of place is an issue for our homes. What makes our homes holy? What is it that we do there? What in the nature of our relationships, in the way in which we conduct those relationships, makes for holiness in our homes? Rambam's answer to this is very simple: It is our imitation of God's attributes on all of these planes, in rela-

tion to the objects that fill our lives, in regard to the relationships in which we exist as persons, in regard to the places in which we reside, and in relation to time and the way in which we utilize it. Investing those moments, persons, objects and places with *qedushah* depends upon our ability to achieve these values in them and through them. If we use our time and our persons with responsibility and productivity, if we engage in relationships in which the sense of individualized mercy, of loyalty, is powerful, then we bring *qedushah* into the reality of our worlds.

The locus of holiness is in the material world, not in the transcendent realm. The Torah records that we were created with bodies because God understood and desired that we use our bodies as the vehicle for achieving *qedushah*. We achieve *qedushah*, not by escaping our bodies but through our bodies and through all of the material existence in which we live as human beings. If God wanted another category of *mal'akhim* (angels), He would have created another category of *mal'akhim*. He would have created another category of disembodied souls that would have been able to sing to Him, all day long, "*Qadosh, Qadosh, Qadosh*." But He obviously didn't want that for us, for He created us with bodies surrounded by material goods so that we could learn from his relational qualities how to conduct all of these aspects of our existence with a sense of holiness.

The world is where meaning resides. If spirituality drives us away from the real world, if our approach to this notion of spirituality involves the mystical merger with God and drives us away from the awareness of the need to govern the reality of our bodily and material existence, then it will do no more than, "*Heneni mukhan u-mezuman*." It will bring us no closer to God. To achieve holiness requires work, and there are no quick solutions in notions of Jewish spirituality. Every time you pick up the *lulav* you must think about what it means and what it does. Every time you do a *mitsvah*, be it putting on *tefillin* or going to the *miqvah*, you must have a deep consciousness of the transformative qualities of the act. Does the act link me to truth? How does it inform my personality, shape who I am, strengthen and affirm my noble qualities? What does it do to help me think about justice and how justice is to be achieved? There is no cheap way out, no short path. Holiness requires work. It requires effort. It requires study. It requires consciousness. It requires attentiveness.

It requires awareness at a deeper level, perhaps deeper than we have ever tried to experience it before.

Torah requires such consciousness—and not only in regard to the ritual *mitsvot*. One of the great tragedies is that we have arrived at the point where even the behavioral *mitsvot* that bear these meanings explicitly, which *bazal* assumed did not require a *berakbah*, have come to be performed meaninglessly. A person today can actually give *tsedaqah* without understanding what that means to his or her personality and to the production of justice in the world. Can you imagine someone returning a lost piece of property without deeply understanding the meaning and the value of that assumption of responsibility? We spend a year teaching our children the talmudic chapter of “*Eilu Metsi’ot*” (BT *Bava Metsi’a*) relating to lost property, yet we fail to encourage them to think about what that means for their holiness and how they achieve holiness in the world. Yet that is the work we must be doing—in our learning, in our symbolic *mitsvot* and in our practical *mitsvot*. When we begin to focus that way, we will begin to think differently about ourselves, about the world at large, and about our Jewish world.

Moreover, when we begin to think that way about justice we may be able to stop thinking about why other people are not producing justice. We would ask, rather, what we ourselves are doing to produce justice. For example, the *agunah* problem is not just a problem of justice for our community or for our communal leaders and rabbis who need to resolve instances of that injustice. Only some 3% of us are members of congregations in which the rabbi will refuse to perform a wedding unless the couple agrees to the use of a pre-nuptial agreement. Where are the rest of us? In our assumption of responsibility for justice, how many of us are members of congregations that actually have and implement sanctions against spouses who are recalcitrant in regard to the issuance of a *get*? Perhaps a few more, but not many. This is not nearly enough. Where are the rest of us? Is justice only for Rabbi Rackman to achieve? Rabbi Rackman may have done extraordinary things. There are many of us who may disagree with him, but it is not his responsibility alone to produce justice. It is our responsibility, every one of us. We have the capacity to produce justice if we assume responsibility and understand

that this is part of our holiness.

Without that assumption of responsibility, my holiness is incomplete. When we think about the quality of interdependence and we think about what that means in regard to living with all other Jews, we realize that we cannot survive as Jews if we are isolated and fragmented. We have to think differently about what it means when, for example, loyalty comes into conflict with justice. We have all been reading about that a lot recently. What happens when loyalty and gratitude comes into conflict with a sense of justice? Some say it’s a simple question. You go for justice, and if the result will be injustice then you walk away from it. It does not seem to me to be quite that simple, that you should walk away from loyalty and from a sense of gratitude. If it were, then why are all those who are critical of the Squarer *basidim* not similarly critical of honoring tobacco merchants who serve as heads of federations? Those merchants are certainly responsible for more deaths and disabilities than any particular group of Jews. But those critical voices are not raised because everybody understands that the balance between loyalty and justice is a very complex matter. One cannot condemn people on the basis of over-simplification of the issue.

We know that there is enormous richness available to us in the quest for *qedushah*. The challenge of holiness is a great challenge that lies before us as individuals and as a community. The challenge is to develop, on both a cognitive and an emotional level, an awareness of God’s values that we want to integrate into our lives as tools for the transformation of our daily lives. The fact is that holiness does not only exist in the synagogue and it does not only exist on *har ha-bayit*. It exists in the daily lives of every one of us, and our investment in creating holiness can create a depth of meaning that we may never previously have experienced, a depth of meaning in our daily existence that is powerful. It keeps us conscious of who God is, who we are, and what our mission is in the world. It is the shaping of real holiness in every aspect of our material existence. If we merely will it, it will not happen. But if we work at it, it might happen—for us as individuals and for us as a community.

Ken yehi ratson.