

STUDY PAPER FOUR

Holiness Today by the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks

The LORD said to Moses: "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy'." (Leviticus 19 vs 1 and 2).

This verse, set at the very centre of the Mosaic books, tells us several radical things:

1. That holiness is not only an attribute of God, but a demand of us also. Here the idea of *imitation Dei*, "the imitation of God", reaches its highest expression.
2. It is a call to us all equally. The Bible does not speak of an elite of holy people, but of "the entire assembly".
3. As the chapter goes on to make clear, a demand of holiness applies to the totality of life. Leviticus 19 contains some of the most famous ethical demands: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (v18), and even more powerfully, "You shall love the stranger" (vs 33 to 34). It speaks of respect for parents and the institution of the family. It talks about the ethics of business and social justice. It also contains certain ritual laws such as the prohibition against crossbreeding of animals and sowing a field with different kinds of seed. These, as we would put it today, have to do with the respect for the environment and the integrity of creation.

What is holiness? The simplest way of understanding it is through the two most conspicuous forms of holiness in the Mosaic books. The first is the Sabbath, the day God himself called holy. The second is the Holy of Holies within the Tabernacle.

These represent sanctity in time and space.

The Sabbath is marked by rest. As for the Holy of Holies, it is said that when Pompey invaded Jerusalem and entered the inner sanctum of the Temple, he was surprised to find it empty. So what unites holiness in time and space is the idea of emptiness.

Holiness is the space we make for God. By emptying our hearts of selfish concerns, we find them filled with the radiance of the Divine presence.

This idea is given its loveliest expression in a story told about Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Kotzk. One night as he was sharing a meal with his disciples, he asked them, "Where does God live?" The disciples were perplexed. "Where does God live?" they asked the Rabbi. "Where does God *not* live? Surely He fills the universe". "No", said the Rabbi, "*God lives where we let Him in*".

What Leviticus 19 tells us is that there is not one of us for whom this is not true, and no aspect of our lives which does not contain within it the possibility of sanctification.

Questions for discussion:

1. In which areas of life do we find sanctification easy and which are most difficult?
2. Does the Jewish idea of holiness differ from a Christian understanding?
3. Is it possible to achieve holiness by following a set of ethical principles without reference to what you believe?
4. Where is holiness to be found in the Middle East of the present day?