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Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the Holiest of them all?

Daphna Yizrael | BronfmanTorah | Kedoshim / Yom Ha'atzmaut 2016

Daphna Yizrael recently joined the team at the Bronfman Fellowships as the director of our Israeli Fellowship, Amitei Bronfman. Originally from Jerusalem and now a resident of Ramat Gan, Daphna has studied, taught and worked in a myriad of Israeli-Jewish centers of learning and community, has served as shlichah (Israeli Emissary) in MetroWest Federation in New Jersey and most recently served as the director of [Beit Tefilah Israeli](#), an independent Israeli - Jewish community in Tel Aviv, of which she is now a happy member. She is married to Zvi Sahar, a theater director and mother of Ayah. daphna@byfi.org

"ואהבת לרעך כמוך", Love your neighbor as yourself
(Leviticus, 19, 18)
Graffiti in Tel Aviv

Today is Israel's 68th Independence Day. Although it is unlikely that the founding fathers of the State planned the Declaration of Independence to coincide with the weekly Torah reading, from the relevance of its words, it would seem that there is no portion more suited to today's celebrations:

The portion opens with an injunction:

Be Holy, for I am Holy, the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:1)

"קדושים תהיו, כי קדוש אני יהוה אלוהיכם"

Many commentators have tried to fathom the meaning of the directive "Holy shall you be". What exactly does "being holy" entail? How can one be or become holy? Is God informing us that we will be holy or is he assigning us a mission to become holy?

The greatest commentators have interpreted the meaning of "holiness" in a variety of ways. One school of thought, whose most prominent member was Rabbi Yehuda haLevi, the great 11th century Spanish poet and philosopher, considered holiness an inherent quality, unique to the people of Israel (and to the land of Israel). By virtue of birth into the right nation, one was insured a ticket of entry into the club of saints.

The other school of thought, whose most prominent representative was the Egyptian jurist and philosopher Rambam (Moses Maimonides), did not believe that "Holy shall you be" was descriptive. Rather, it was a command requiring hard work indeed! It emphasized the fact that this was not a commandment in and of itself, but an obligation to undertake and fulfill all of the other commandments. As he says in the introduction to his Book of Mitzvot:

For God's injunction, "Holy shall you be", "and you shall sanctify yourselves and be holy" are injunctions to fulfill the entire Torah, as if saying: "Be holy by fulfilling all that I am commanding you, and careful in all that I asked you to be careful about."

כי אמרו 'קדושים תהיו', והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים, 'הם צוויין לקיים כל התורה, כאילו

יאמר: היה קדוש בהיותך עושה כל מה שצויתך בו, ונזהר מכל מה שהזהרתך ממנו.

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Yeshayahu Leibowitz, the great 20th century Jewish/Israeli philosopher, unquestionably a follower of the Rambam, not only adopted his opinion, but severely critiqued the results likely to follow from adhering to Yehuda haLevi's school of thought:

"'Holy shall you be', while a most exalted and lofty commandment, may also be an extremely dangerous belief. It could, and was indeed was, erroneously and occasionally willfully, interpreted to mean that the very nature of the people of Israel imbues them with holiness. This perception releases the Jewish/Israeli individual from responsibility and grants a misplaced sense of confidence. Being holy is a directive, a purpose, an obligation; an assigned task and program. It is not a given! Understanding the concept of holiness as a quality rooted in the very nature of the people, rather than as a role and a mission imposed on the people of Israel, turns faith into idolatry."

Holiness, according to the Rambam, and even more explicitly, according to Yeshayahu Leibowitz, is not an automatic lottery prize. It is the undertaking of an arduous task. Both the Rambam and Leibowitz believed that the directive does not refer to any particular commandment, and there is no one, single commandment that imbues holiness more than another. However, is it merely coincidental that after this injunction there is a long list containing one of the most beautiful and moral corpus' of law that have ever been given to mankind?

The corpus of law in [Leviticus 19](#) describes a society in which the stranger is respected, and justice is maintained; particularly on the fringes of society. A society that does not know exploitation and plundering, hatred or revenge; a society in which grudges are not held. Where gossip and shaming is absent and where business is conducted ethically. Where converts are held in esteem; a society permeated through and through with faith.

The connection between the injunction to remain holy and between social directives teaches us that holiness does not stem from sacrificing lambs or praying in the Temple (nor by meditation, solitude or other spiritual tools). Holiness is attained by fashioning a just society; one filled with compassion and humanity; a

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society that knows how to balance between those in the center and those on the sidelines.

And what does the above have to do with Israel Independence Day?

To my mind, as an Israeli citizen, the weekly Torah portion and the commandment "Holy shall you be" reminds us, the citizens of Israel, that we still have our work cut out for us. While we naturally must celebrate Israel's worthy achievements over the past 68 years, give thanks and rejoice in what already exists, we must also shoulder the responsibility that Leibowitz's reading of the portion implies. The gift of Israel's birthday is a mirror; one that helps us check out how we look, year after year. It shows us how we treat the weak, how we embrace the convert, how we ensure the worthiness of our scales of justice, as both a society and a nation. I believe this message rings true not only for the citizens of Israel. It holds true for each and every society; while beckoning anyone to whom Israel is important to participate in the act of Tikkun Olam (correction of the world).

In ending, another little gift for Israel's Independence Day: Nina Simone, singing from the words of the portion!

**"וְאָמַר לְכֶם אַתֶּם תִּירָשׁוּ אֶת אֲדָמָתָם וְאֲנִי אֶתְנַנֶּנָּה לְכֶם לְרִשְׁתָּ אֹתָהּ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם
אֲשֶׁר הִבְדַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן הָעַמִּים."**

"But I have said unto you: 'Ye shall inherit their land, and I will give it unto you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey.' I am the LORD your God, who have set you apart from the people."

The phrase "Land of Milk and Honey" appears 16 times in the Torah, referring to the geographic attributes of Israel. This phrase, put to music in Israel in the 50's, has since become iconic in Israeli culture. Nina Simone learned the words and the melody from the legendary Shlomo Carlebach. Enjoy!

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