

Bringing Holiness to the Front Lines

As human rights in both the United States and Israel continue to come under attack, we find ourselves on the front lines more and more. Sometimes we feel forced to the front as a result of attacks aimed directly at Jews; other times we choose to be there, as engaged citizens and as allies to other vulnerable communities.

The term “front line” is a metaphor from war, and specifically from an older era of wars in which there were clearly defined battle zones. Today, both literally and figuratively, we may instead feel caught in guerilla warfare, with no clear front lines or safe zones.

Or perhaps the military analogy doesn't work for us at all. We would hardly be the first generation of Jewish clergy who preferred not to foreground military imagery and thinking. The rabbis of the Talmud placed the miracle of the oil at the center of the Chanukah story in order to deemphasize the story of the Maccabees' military victory.

This discussion guide and text study explores how we can move from feeling our “front lines” to be places only of battle and of tension, to placing holiness at our front lines.



Our front lines...

1. When have you felt yourself to be on the “front lines” of a struggle? How did you get there? How did you feel about your role? Were you in a place you wanted to be?
2. Have the “front lines” changed for you over the past year? In what ways?

...could use a bit more holiness.

3. The Talmudic rabbis turned the story of the Maccabees' military victory into a tale about a small jar of oil that miraculously lasted for eight nights. Through this retelling, a holiday commemorating a battle became instead a celebration of divinity. Has your own spirituality ever come alive for you in the course of your activism or political engagement? When did that happen and how? What was the impact of this experience?
4. How do you share this intersection of activism and holiness with your community (if you do), or how do you aspire to? Human Rights Shabbat is meant to be a day that brings sanctity to the ideas and practices of human rights. In what ways could it be a useful conduit for you? Does that feel different in the present moment than it might have a year or two ago?

Sefat Emet, Parshat Shemini, 5641

The Torah says, "You are to hallow yourselves and be holy... I am YHWH, the one bringing you up from the land of Egypt to be God to you..." (Lev. 11:44-45, Fox translation).

The meaning of these verses is that in Egypt, it became clear that through hallowing ourselves in this [broken] world and standing strong against wicked people and forces of evil, we can extend the flow of holiness in this world.

As our rabbis taught: a person who hallows herself slightly from below receives much holiness from above. This is because a small amount of holiness below is much more beloved by [God] than a large amount of holiness above. The evidence for this is that God exerted Godself, as it were, to take us out of Egypt and to make us holy to [God]. Finding holiness in this [broken] world is exceptionally beloved to [God], for the upper realms are inherently holy!

When we distance ourselves from the fleeting things of the world, we attain holiness.

The Torah uses a reflexive verb, "Hallow yourselves," because it is impossible to grasp holiness with our hands—we can only cause it to extend its flow [in the world] through our spiritual action.

וכ' והתקדשתם והייתם קדושים כו'
אני ה' המעלה אתכם מארץ מצרים
להיות לכם לאלקים.

פי' שביצ"מ נתברר זאת. כי ע"י
התקדשות מעוה"ז ולגבור נגד
הרשעים והסט"א. ע"י זה זוכין
בעוה"ז להמשיך קדושה.

כאשר דרשו חז"ל אדם מקדש
עצמו מעט מלמטה מקדשין אותו
מלמעלה הרבה. והטעם שמעט
קדושה בעוה"ז חביב לפניו מהרבה
למעלה. וע"ז העדות שכביכול
הטריח הבורא ית' להוציאנו
ממצרים לקדשנו אליו בעבור כי
מציאות קדושה בעוה"ז חביב לפניו
ביותר כי העליונים בעצמם הם
קדושים

ואנחנו ע"י התרחקות מהבלי עולם
זוכין לקדושה.

והתקדשתם הוא לשון נפעל שא"י
ליקח הקדושה בידים רק לגרום
המשכת הקדושה בכח פרישות
מעוה"ז:

Discussion Questions:

1. The Sefat Emet is trying to explain why the Torah uses apparently redundant language, "hallow yourselves and be holy." What, according to the Sefa Emet, is the difference between these two processes?
2. What are some of the ways the Sefat Emet describes for attaining holiness or "extending its flow"? How have you found yourself to be taking part in such actions?
3. What is the relationship between the holiness we bring on ourselves, and the holiness granted to us by God? Have you ever experienced such an interplay of holiness?
4. What are the effects (on us, on the world, on God) when we find holiness?
5. What symbolic roles is Egypt playing in this teaching?
6. How might you apply this teaching to our own activism or political engagement today?

