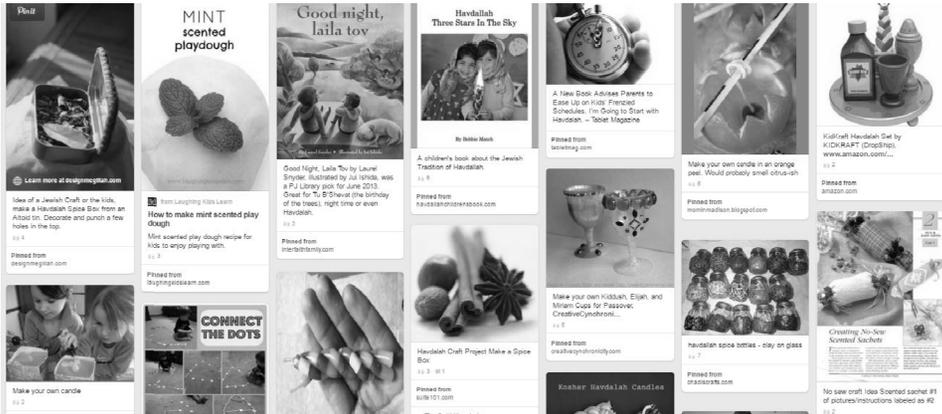




Easing the Transition from Shabbat

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Havdalah for young children and families (<http://pin.it/qLL1iEs>)

The parashah delineates several distinctions between holy and unholy: what constitutes an acceptable sacrifice; which animals fall within the category of kosher; the actions that might transition a vessel, oven, or garment to the status of unclean.

At the end of Shabbat, we invoke these same words during havdalah, praising God “who makes a distinction between holy and profane.” Judaism recognizes that the transition from the calmness of Shabbat to the demands of the work week can be jarring, and that ritual infused with joy and playfulness can ease the anxiety. Havdalah activates all of the senses—by having us sniff the spices, gaze at the fire, taste the wine, hear the melody, feel the warmth of the flame on our outstretched hands.

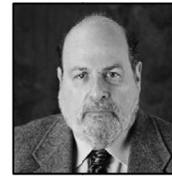
The Paradigm Project’s Pinterest board for Havdalah highlights this engagement of the senses. Although havdalah was not originally crafted as a child-centered ritual, it appeals to that nervous kid inside each one of us, the one who wished for just one more day of vacation, or that the demands of Monday morning might be postponed by a snowstorm. Much in the same way that children desire elaborate bedtime rituals to ease the transition to solitude and darkness, so too does havdalah ease the transition from “holy time.”

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Parashat Shemini 5776 Shabbat Parah

פרשת שמיני תשע"ו
שבת פרה



How Can People Be Holy?

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Shemini (Lev. 9–11) contains two main topics: the elaborate sacrificial rites performed on the eighth day of the dedication of the Tabernacle, and the laws regarding kosher and nonkosher animals. The first topic details the numerous sacrifices accompanying the last stages of the dedication of the shrine, which reach an intensity matched only by the yearly rites of the Day of Atonement. This is no accident, because the annual event is meant to restore the shrine to the purity it possessed on the day it was dedicated.

At the end of the ceremony of sacrifice and purification performed by Aaron and his sons, the *Kavod*—the divine Glory, which had entered the Holiest Place of the Tabernacle (Exod. 40:34)—revealed itself to the people, and shot out a flame of fire that consumed the sacrifices on the altar. The altar fire thus merged with the divine fire. Since that altar flame was never allowed to go out, its perpetual presence in the midst of the camp, as a nightly glow and the cloud of smoke by day, were a sign of the divine Presence in the midst of the People, similar to the pillar of cloud and fire that had led them in the desert. The same was true of the later Temple(s). The altar fire was a larger form of the eternal light.

But the sanctified mood of the day was broken by another fiery act. Two of Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered “strange fire” (*esh zarah*), and the divine fire shot out again and consumed them (Lev. 10:1–3). The strange fire may have been an offering of unconsecrated incense (*cf. ketoret zarah* in Exod. 30:9); but in context the offering is condemned as one that God had not authorized (*asher lo tzivvah otam*). That seems to be the crime. All through the dedication rites, it was repeatedly stated that everything was done as God had commanded Moses. Although the prohibition, in this context, against priests

drinking alcohol before serving in the shrine perhaps hints that the brothers had imbibed, Nadab and Abihu made the offering—even if well-meaning—on their own initiative.

The two consuming fire events—of the sacrifices on the altar and of the miscreant sons—form a play of positive and negative, a warning that priests must be punctilious in the cult or risk death. As God said after the tragedy: “I must be sanctified [especially] by those nearest to me”—that is, the priesthood, an office fraught with danger.

The events in Leviticus 10 are a counterpart to an event at the end of the wanderings, when Moses and Aaron are condemned by God for having “not sanctified” Him (Num. 20:12), although their fate is less immediate than that of Nadab and Abihu. The names of the two sons of Jeroboam—Abijah and Nadab, who succeeded their father on the throne of the Northern Kingdom of Israel—are almost the same as the names of Aaron’s sons consumed by the fire. Jeroboam is viewed as a sinner who turned to idolatry by setting up two calves, in Bethel and Dan, a crime close to that of Nadab and Abihu’s father, Aaron, in making the Golden Calf. The intrabiblical allusion seems to hint that priestly laxity in the legitimate cult commanded by God is equivalent to the gross idolatry of the later Northern Kingdom.

There is also a deeper message, regarding the nature of holiness itself, a message relevant to the entire theological undertaking of the priestly tradition. *Kedushah* (holiness) is essentially a feature of the divine, the supernatural, shared by God and the other divine beings, sometimes called *kedoshim*. But at Sinai, Israel is called a “holy nation, a kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6). In effect, all of Israel is holy, as Korah would later point out (Num. 16:3), though the actual service of the shrine was delegated by God specifically to the Levites and especially the family of Aaron.

Now, divine holiness is something that is completely incomprehensible to humans. It is what Rudolf Otto called the “numinous,” the “wholly other” of divinity. In what sense can humans be holy? Can they attain true divinity? Not in the eyes of the priestly tradition. Later in Leviticus (Lev. 19) will come the demand that Israel be holy, as God is holy—to do so, that is, through *imitatio dei*, imitation of true divinity. In Leviticus 20, holiness for people will be characterized as punctiliousness in making distinctions

between the sacred and the profane. Shemini is a preparation for that kind of definition of holiness.

As noted, the statement is often repeated in the parashah that the rites were done as God commanded Moses. Making an offering that was not commanded condemned Nadab and Abihu. God called their action a violation of His holiness. Therefore, holiness is doing only what God has authorized. It is strictly delineated, and later in Leviticus will be restated as a principle of making distinctions and separations. That is how humanity can “imitate” the divine. The holiness of God remains an unfathomable mystery to humans, but in their service of God they adhere to the divinely revealed rules, which in terms of the shrine and cult will consist of strict delineations.

It is perhaps for this reason that the next section of Shemini details the laws of permitted and forbidden animals. The distinctions are easy and visible in the main, in terms of cloven hooves and chewing the cud. The rules evoke the divine acts of creation as told in Genesis 1 (also part of the priestly tradition), because creation consisted of separations and distinctions. Now, in Leviticus 11, comes a refinement in terms of divine commands concerning created creatures. Some are allowed, others forbidden. Israel is to be trained to holiness, as a kind of education.

There is immense danger in interacting with the holy and divine—manifested in the fate of the two sons of Aaron, as well as in the later fate of the unfortunate Uzzah, who touched the Ark while trying to prevent its falling to the ground (2 Sam. 6:6–7)—a danger that the priests could forget only at the peril of their lives. Through strict adherence to God’s rules alone, can the danger of approaching the divine be avoided, and the blessings of holiness be channeled by the priests to the people.

God may remain incomprehensible, but His rules are known and observable. Though the vast majority of cultic rites are no longer practiced, and we may not fear the fates of Uzzah and Aaron’s sons, the quest to share in the holiness of a mysterious God is still a part of our lives. And the laws of permitted and forbidden animals, among myriad other distinctions in biblical and rabbinic law, continue to offer us a path to *kedushah*.